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Leading in Crooked Rooms: Race, Gender, Culture and Black Women's Leadership Skills and Practices

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A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education Leadership, Policy and Justice at Virginia Commonwealth University

by Portia Newman
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To my family, to the young people in my life and to the village that continues to raise me – I love you all ways, always.

Abstract

LEADING IN CROOKED ROOMS: RACE, GENDER, CULTURE AND BLACK WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP SKILLS AND PRACTICES

By Portia Newman, Ph.D.

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education Leadership, Policy and Justice at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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Major Director: Charol Shakeshaft, Ph.D., Professor, School of Education

The literature on Black women leaders, where it exists, focuses on the barriers to Black women becoming leaders or being fully empowered when in leadership positions. However, to understand the leadership identity of Black women, and perhaps help to explain the absence of Black women in formal leadership spaces, means to examine the influence of race, gender, and culture on leadership behavior, as well as the setting in which leadership exists. This qualitative grounded theory study explored the leadership skills and practices of 15 senior-level cross sector Black women leaders. The data was collected in two phases: 1) a leadership questionnaire and 2) two focus groups analyzed using a constructive approach to the analysis. Relatedly, there is little researched or written on how Black women's leadership practice is developed within systems of whiteness that create conditions for survival and protection. The study findings suggest that this impacts how Black women describe their practice as a result of their racialized, gendered and cultural experiences. A grounded framework of the interrelatedness of their identities, leadership experience informs Black women's employment of strategic skills and practices.

Keywords: Black Feminist Theory, intersectionality, White racial frame, community cultural wealth, Black women identity development, leadership development, women leaders,

cross-sector leaders, Black women's leadership practice, Black women education leaders, Black women industry leadership, stereotypes, cross-sector leadership qualifications and Black women professional identity

Vita

Portia Nicole Newman was born on February, 9, 1988 in Wilson, NC. She is a 2006 graduate of Ralph L. Fike High School, a 2010 graduate of UNC Chapel Hill, and a 2013 graduate of the University of Illinois at Chicago. She is a former PreK educator (2012) and college access and retention professional (2010-2014) who continues to serve in leadership with and in service to cross-sector educational leaders (2014-2018). With her learning and leadership development background, Portia's relevant work experience include a focus on people development, programs, diversity and inclusion.

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"The most disrespected person in America is the Black woman.
The most unprotected person in America is the Black woman.
The most neglected person in America is the Black woman."
(X, 2008, 24:36)

Chapter 1: Introduction: Existence as Resistance

For Black women[1], the simple idea of our existence is an act of resistance. Although Malcolm X's words may be difficult to process, they eloquently describe the conditions for which Black[2] women develop their identity. His words prompt a critique of how beliefs, policies, and practices prevent the entry and advancement of Black women leaders across industries. Professionally, Black women are developing their leadership identity within institutional structures riddled with racism and sexism. Despite the challenging environment, Black women continue to increase degrees earned and roles assumed while representing as the first in many of the positions (Reeves & Guyot, 2017). The power of this revelation is that Black women have found ways to navigate, sustain and survive these spaces as resistance, which is necessary to advance their careers.

Black women are 13.7% of the US population and are an underrepresented group in senior-level [3]cross-sector[4] roles ("Women in the Labor Force," 2019). According to Ngue et al.

[1] I, the researcher, am included in the reference to Black women throughout the study. This is relevant as to not separate my personal identity and experience when using objective language.

[2] This term refers to African American or Black identifying people who refer to themselves as Americans with African ancestry in accordance with the census designations (Jones, 2015).

[3] Refers to the role level and positions across industries, suggesting that senior-level in higher education refers to senior administrators (Deans, Faculty, etc.) and in industry any VP or c-suite executives.

[4] Refers to multiple professional industries including but not limited to, education, technology, business, etc. and identifies transferable skills necessary to effectiveness and productivity.

(2020) Black women represent 1% of C-suite leadership and less than 2% of VP roles in corporate industries. In PK-12 education, women represent nearly 54% of school principals, while Black women represent 13% of that population (Lomotey, 2019). Although in the last decade, at the district level, the number of women superintendents have increased 26.8%, noting the population of Black women superintendents making up less than 2.2% of the population (Robinson & Shakeshaft, 2016). In higher education, Black women represent less than 5% of college presidents and less than 5% of full-time faculty across universities (Gagliardi et al., 2017; *National Center for Education Statistics,* 2017). The data on Black women leader's representation or lack thereof indicate a need to understand the various leadership experiences that exist among this demographic.

The data on the presence of these cross-sector leader experiences speaks to Black women's current positionality in the workforce. In these positions, Black women have reported inequity in compensation, limited interaction with senior leadership and working with unsupportive managers (Ngue et al., 2020). Unwritten social norms force Black women to choose between gender and race and pressure them to find a balance between their cultural values and beliefs that don't always align with white dominant organizational cultures, making it more difficult to navigate leadership positions (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2015). The unwritten rules set cultural practices related to employee engagement with leaders, dress codes, and leaving no room for error in their leadership (Wyche, 2008). As a result, Black women's place and space within the workplace is representative of the restrictive nature of their development within systems of oppression and marginalization. Rosette et al. (2016) describes the tension between Black women's perceived agentic ability and how counter-stereotypical behavior is penalized thus increasing the impact of bias on leadership mobility. Additional research on Black women's

career aspirations notes the desire to be promoted from middle management and administrative roles to senior/executive leadership within organizations (Ashley, 2019; Ngue et al., 2020). This reality is important because it has shaped how Black women are perceived and explains how Black women internalize these short-sighted perceptions of self. This context is the impetus for emerging research about Black women leader's skills and practices that develop within inauspicious conditions.

The Crooked Room

Historically, the perception of Black women was framed by the intersection of their personal being and the performative nature of their existence. Assigned to domesticated roles, as entertainment, as laborers, and always in service to others --Black women were forced into a tight space to develop their identity. As an often-scrutinized group, Black women must always "contend with hypervisibility imposed by their lower social status" (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 39). Melissa Harris-Perry (2011), in *Sister Citizen,* uses an analogy of a crooked room to describe the confined spaces by which Black women develop their identity. This crooked room exists because of limiting perceptions about Black women, rooted in historical and socio-political ideas. Harris-Perry (2011) describes a system of Black women's identity nomenclature used to categorize their existence through historical contexts, cultural experiences, and as political actors. The crooked room has regarded Black women's identity stereotypes as: Mammy, Jezebel and Sapphire (Harris-Perry, 2011; West, 2008). Table 1 describes the connection of the Mammy, Jezebel and Sapphire archetypes operating within the crooked room and attempts to define them within the context of leadership.

Table 1

Black Women Identity Stereotype Imagery & Leadership Experience

Stereotype	Description	Connection to Leadership Experience
Mammy	Large bodied Black woman, strong, maid/in-service to, nurturing, dominant, loyal and significant maternal nature (Sewell, 2012)	Assertive, caring, selfless, collaborative, supportive and perception that one can manage multiple projects in support of others
Jezebel	A term to rationalize the trauma of race and sexual liberties taken with Black women, a hyper-sexuality of Black women's bodies to indulge for entertainment, perception of promiscuity (Harris-Perry, 2011; West, 2008)	Defamation of character which challenges the perceptions of competence and agency as leaders; presenting as not deterred by conventional expectations. A connection to image and the aesthetic leading to unwritten rules that are implicit in workplace policy and culture.
Sapphire	The personification of the anger experience, direct, aggressive, and raging that is experienced as alarming or comedic (West, 2008)	Using direct, dominant, or passionate communication strategy that is met with resistance or fear; met with resistance when using one's voice to evoke change

Black women's identities are significantly characterized within music, literature and society. They are represented in the anthology, The Bridge Called My Back (Moraga & Anzaldua, 1981), and the visual artistry of the choreopoem, *for colored girls* (Shange et al., 1976), centering a collective identity struggle within personal and professional spaces. Consequently, Black women's public performance and politicized existence has formed within the confines of systemic structure of bias and oppression. In the analogy, the crooked room represents the structural systems that become walls and glass ceilings. In response, Black women have adopted a "culture of dissemblance" used to protect and hide their identity for survival, necessarily impacting how they show up in the world (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 58). Harris-Perry (2011) proposes that the experiences of Black women, their identity development, and behaviors exist

because of strategies that have been employed to navigate the crooked rooms which are tilted in ways that accommodate stereotypes about them. Harris-Perry (2011) speaks to the politicized nature of Black women's identity development that can be reframed within the context of leadership skills and practice. Society does not accept Black women as complex or intersectional rather, the crooked room creates a binary space of ideas about Black women, never seeing them in between (Harris-Perry, 2011). This research is an opportunity to acknowledge how Black women have been predisposed to a crooked room thus proposing further analysis of how race, gender and culture impacts their leadership skills and practice.

Black, Woman & Researcher

As a Black woman, it's almost impossible to fractionate the elements of my Black-womanhood. All my identities show up bold, at the same time, always, all ways. As a Black woman scholar, I am constantly grappling with how to find my voice in this work and feeling the pressure to best represent so many all at once. It is clear that my scholarship is both personal and professional and deeply rooted in my love for people and leadership. My sense of identity is even more animated by my southern rural upbringing in the 252[5]. I grew up with an what seemed like an infinite number of cousins, mastering respectability politics in school, and living in faith groomed by the southern Baptist church. Those experiences within the city limits sometimes set bounds about what people believed I could be or who I would become. Luckily, my Black momma in her Black momma ways raised a daughter with an imagination that would propel me to other places and spaces. I did just that. I moved on with home and lots of music in my heart. Race, gender and culture have been my personal metrics for opportunity, thus creating space for my leadership.

[5] The area code for Wilson, North Carolina

With a rise in the awareness of racism within America and a trend of diversity and inclusion, I am acutely aware of how Black bodies --Black women -- continue to become the center of our dinner discussions, political activism, research agendas and labor force statistics. In preparation for this doctoral program, I started to think about my leadership and couldn't separate my racialized, gendered, and cultural experiences from my practice. With limited language to explain my thinking I started to reflect on my own experiences. As a Black woman who has served in leadership and supports others who do so, I wanted to understand how intersectionality and lived experience informed leadership praxis. I explored how my people-centered work with leaders across organizations, advocacy for equity, and interest in growth and development informed by my racialized, gendered, and cultural experience were relevant to my leadership. Prior to becoming a doctoral student, I served over eight years in leadership development, program management, and learning. I understand the necessity of advancing our knowledge, skills, and abilities in leadership praxis to be effective leaders.

The political and performed behaviors of Black women leaders are those that I have experienced and witnessed, thus making this research personal and professional. The Black women in this study share similar identities, similar career trajectories, and possible similarities in our leadership experience. It is difficult to explain exactly what it feels like to study who I am and who I prepare to be. I am sometimes without the words, I use music to help tell stories, explain important moments, and provide context for my experience. While conducting the research, during analysis and while writing, I listened to an extensive number of hours of music for thinking and processing the data. Appendix A is a track list of songs co-created by me and the participants with song reflecting this research study and our leadership.

Chapter Summaries

Race, gender and culture as critical identity markers is used to expand existing ideas of leadership skills and practice development. The research study focused on identifying skills and practices, understanding the influence the intersectional identities of Black women and developed a grounded framework for identifying Black women's salient leadership skills and practice.

Chapter one introduces the concept of the crooked room as a lens to understand Black women's positionality and lived experience and he research study to my experiences. Chapter two grounds the study in the current leadership conditions for Black women, explains the purpose of the study and identifies the research questions. Chapter three presents the theoretical orientation with an introduction to the White Racial Frame (Feagin, 2010) and Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000) as superimposed theories creating a systemic structure by which Black women operate. Relatedly, the Community Cultural Wealth Model (Yosso, 2005) is the lens to see how race, gender, and culture informs leadership and practice. Chapter three also includes a review of the leadership theory and practices literature. The literature was focused on race, gender and culture as variables for understanding existing barriers, resistance practices, and Black women's leadership in action. The fourth chapter details my methodology and research design. Grounded in the ways Black women engage and share space, this study invited senior-level cross-sector Black women to engage in community with each other in two focus groups. Together we reflected and discussed Black women's leadership experience. Chapters five and six detail the analysis and findings of the study organized by each research question. The findings in chapters five and six chapters include details from the memos, vlogs, personal narratives and open discourse from the data collection. Chapter 7 focuses on the grounded framework to explicate the influence of race, gender and culture on Black women's leadership and their

distinctive leadership skills and practices. In chapter eight discuss the implication the research and opportunities for future research.

Chapter 2: Race, Gender, Culture and Leadership

Unpacking the leadership identity of Black women means to challenge the notion of gender, race, and cultural discrimination deeply rooted in hegemonic social forces. Black women leaders directly impact and inform critical decisions demonstrated by the "increased multicultural understanding" of their work and ability to apply it to leadership (Santamaría, 2014, p. 349). Navigating the terminology associated with Black women's leadership practice as researcher was challenging and doing so within in this study also presented some limitations and gaps. The literature was helpful in positioning leadership identify development for Black women within the context of leadership theory, although the scholarship is limited. Considering the impact of multiple systems, Black women advance their ideas about leadership through their political and personal activism (Alston, 2012). Rosser-Mims (2010) synthesizes observations of Black women in three themes; how Black women develop techniques of survival and leadership, how networks of Black women reinforce their place within leadership, and how Black women in leadership represent collective experiences of the community. Rosser-Mims (2010) is describing the very pillars central to the stylistic approach to leadership of Black women. Lived experience and survivorship in leadership spaces for Black women offers a different approach to their practice, evident in their attention to details, preparedness, critical thinking, and team building (Alexander, 2010; Alston, 2012). As a result, this study addresses the need for research on cross-sector Black women leaders and their practices influenced by socio-cultural assets.

For Us, By Us

The purpose of this grounded theory study is to develop and understanding of Black women's leadership through the exploration of how senior-level cross-sector Black women

leaders describe the influence of race, gender, and culture on their leadership. Cross-sector leaders are defined as individuals who have deliberately worked in multiple sectors and those who possess a set of skills that are transferable across multiple sectors and concerned with ideas of collaboration, human-centered approach, systems and structures that yield effective collaborative working environments (Becker & Smith, 2018). The aim is to examine what it is about Black women's intersectional identities, social conditions, and lived experiences that informs their cross-sector leadership practice. Using a narrative strategy with Black women participants, I investigated how Black women have adjusted their socio-cultural learnings to present as resources relevant to their skills and practice (Yosso & Burciaga, 2016).

A significant amount of existing empirical research focuses on barriers to leadership and names programmatic solutions to aid in the advancement of Black women leaders. Ngue et al. (2020), a digital resource exploring issues related to women in corporate companies, recently conducted a survey on the barriers to leadership for Black women. Findings suggest that in addition to race and gender, Black women are micromanaged, met with microaggressions, and have less access to support (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016; Ngue et al., 2020). These barriers also exist in higher education spaces, creating environments where Black women struggle with exclusion and isolation in their roles (Mainah & Perkins, 2015). While current research is concentrated on leadership barriers, fewer studies have described the inherent skills and practices of Black women's leadership across industries.

Research Questions

This proposed study seeks to elevate a new narrative about Black women's leadership skills and practices, placing them within a historical and socio-cultural context. By centering Black women in my study, I seek to locate and affirm their leadership identity at the intersection of race,

gender, and culture. Dr. Bettina Love (2020) recently gave a keynote address and set a charge to scholars to do research that heralds the humanity in and beauty of Black life. In accordance with Love's charge to see the power and value of Black contributions to our world, my initial research questions asked:

RQ1: How do senior-level cross-sector Black women leaders describe their leadership skills and practice?

RQ2: How do senior-level cross-sector Black women perceive the influence of race, gender, and culture on their leadership skills and practice?

After the review of the literature and engaging with the study participants, an additional research question was formulated to identify specific context for the grounded framework. That question was:

RQ3: How do senior-level cross-sector Black women characterize the elevated leadership skills and practices influenced by their racialized, gendered and socio-cultural lived experience?

These questions seek to reframe leadership skills and practice discourse for Black women co-created *for us, by us.* Additionally, this study seeks to inform organizational practices concerned with developing inclusive work environments and advancing opportunities for Black women.

Theoretical Orientation

The crooked room, bound and restrictive makes the "struggle to stand upright" more difficult for Black women. To understand the experience of senior-level cross-sector Black women leaders and the way in which they develop their leadership practices this study is grounded in two theories used to situate Black women's leadership experience. Black Feminist Thought (BFT) (Collins, 2000) and the White Racial Frame (WRF) (Feagin, 2010) provide the frame for understanding the experiences of Black women leaders. The WRF and BFT are

overlaying theories that create a frame to understand the broader systems from which the leadership skills and practice are developed. Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) model provides foundational insight and a lens to discover the inborn skills and practices influenced by Black women's intersectional identities. Together these frameworks identify the intangible ways that white ideologies exist and are central to positioning whiteness, to which all others are compared. The link between the frameworks catalyzes a rationale for redefining leadership and valuing the development of Black women's leadership skills and practice.

White Racial Frame

The White Racial Frame illustrates how racism and discrimination is endemic to all systems and structures. It is a tool used to interrogate epistemologies of whiteness that support both subconsciously and consciously how one upholds the standard that Whiteness is good, privileged, and powerful within the leadership context. The gaze of the WRF is a powerful mechanism that implies control and is a function of seeing the other; positioning Black women as a spectacle to be surveyed and appraised, which prevents Black women from being viewed as full citizens (Harris-Perry, 2011). This frame is supported by two sub-frames: 1) whiteness as a virtue and 2) negative stereotyping of Black and Brown people (Feagin, 2010). These two sub-frames together permit a view of race relations that is grounded in the underlying efforts to "maintain the invisibility of Black women," (Alexander, 2010, p. 198). Together each sub-frame constantly works to subjugate Black women and fuels anti-black sentiments in the media, in the workplace, and in other institutions.

The WRF is a tool used to explore the intersections of racism and discrimination in systems, images, media, and policy that justify the existence of racism (Gomez et al., 2019). Consequently, the WRF evokes a damaging inspection of Black women by creating a strict and

narrow idea of how Black women are perceived. This is evident in the literature as well as through Black women's experience. The WRF describes systems and institutions with "white individuals acting to impose or maintain racial identity, privilege, and dominance vis-à-vis people of color in everyday interactions" (Feagin, 2010, p. 14). This overlaps with existing impressions of marginalization and oppression in our country and the ways it materializes in workspaces. The structure of the WRF forces Black women to bend and break to fit in society. Black women commit to this for the sake of advancement, often sacrificing their true selves.

Black Feminist Thought

Collins (2000) positions this theory as an extension to Critical Race Theory (CRT) in a way that elevates the intersectional identities of Black women, highlights the tapestry of lived experiences, and creates a space that directly links the narratives to Black women. BFT is constructed by Black women for Black women and is foundational to reclaiming the knowledge about Black women and decoding it separate from the WRF. This work calls for critical understanding of how Black women's intersectional identities can be complicated by experience and culture (Crenshaw, 1989).

BFT does not ignore the implications of implicit bias and blatant racial discrimination; instead, it hypothesizes about how Black women navigate the world while being both sensitive and adaptable in the face of adversity (Evans-Winters, 2019). BFT addresses the "intersections of oppression" while understanding the activism that is displayed through Black women's leadership (Collins, 2000, p. xi). BFT is a collective theory made up of many identities, redefining who Black women are and how Black women exist. Black women with diverse lived experiences are all impacted by White ideologies and provocations that challenge their existence, therefore preventing the increase of diversity in leadership spaces. BFT is compelling for Black

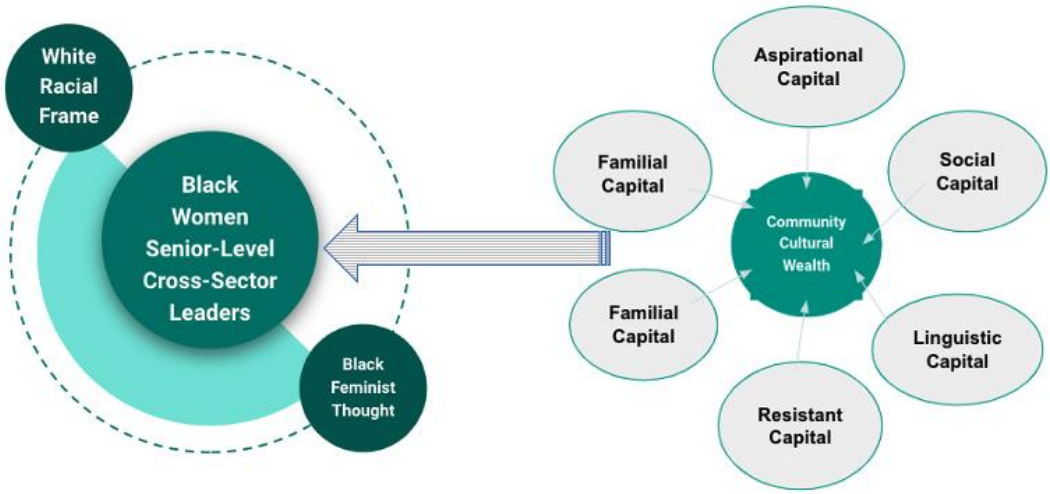
women leaders as it investigates the link between social identities and leadership practices subjugated by work-place politics and people (Harris & Leonardo, 2018). This is evident in the way Black women constantly negotiate space and power. Black women draw from these constraints of racism and perceived limits of gender and still develop atypical leadership skills and practice rooted in culture.

Community Cultural Wealth Model

Analysis of the entangled experience of history, politics, and culture creates a unique opportunity to understand how Black women contribute to leadership praxis (Alston, 2012). Black women's leadership is then defined by the "collective survival and emotional vitality" of their leadership influence (Curtis, 2017). Tara Yosso demonstrated in "Whose Culture Has Capital? A Critical Race Theory Discussion of Community Cultural Wealth" (2005), that "community cultural wealth is an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression" (p. 77). This model is used to "reframe culture as a resource for communities of color rather than a barrier to success" (Yosso & Burciaga, 2016, p. 4). Yosso's (2005) analysis of these cultural assets in the model offer insight into the historical and socio-cultural factors influencing leadership. To conceptualize the relationship between the community cultural wealth model and the leadership experiences of senior-level cross-sector Black women, Figure 1 below illustrates how the cultural assets are at the core of Black women's leadership practice. Simultaneously the external systems forged by the interaction between BFT and the WRF also impact the leadership skills and practice of Black women leaders.

Figure 1

Concept Map



Misperceptions of Black women's identity are reinforced by the partial recounts of history, negative media images, and stereotypical tropes of the crooked room that influence the way the world engages Black women. Despite being viewed as promiscuous, eternal caretakers, and angry, Black women continue to find ways to resist and become active participants in the struggle for fair representation and equity (Harris-Perry, 2011).

Conceptualizing Qualitative Inquiry for Black Women

The intentional exploration was not about looking for any particular idea or concept but, rather to create space for the stories of these Black women to detail the elements of their practice. Exploratory research on Black bodies has landed us in plenty of bad science projects and one-sided theories of existence framed in whiteness. The goal of this research is to take an assets-based approach that assumes that the Black women participants are the experts of their lives and their narratives should be heard, seen, and documented as value (Collins, 2000).

This approach was both intentional and critical as Black women are complex individuals. Evans-Winters (2019) grapples with the complexity of Black women's existence as the researcher and the researched. As an outcome, her work suggests that there should be more space to research Black women wholistically and in this study choosing to use multiple points of entry throughout the discussion, interactively engaging with the data and analysis while centering narrative truths are necessary elements to this involved method of inquiry and analysis. This focus on building and co-creating the knowledge around Black women's experience forces the researcher to navigate "the contours of racism, classism, and sexism by virtue of existing in the confines of the matrix of White domination" thus making Black women the experts on themselves (Evan-Winters, p. 15, 2019). This approach not only asked lots of questions but used multiple sources as resources to understand and explored how Black women described their skills and practices and how socio-cultural factors influence Black women's leadership. The use of these frameworks in tandem creates opportunities for reconstructing the ideas of Black women leaders at the nexus of their lived experiences and the White gaze.

Chapter 3: Literature Review: Leading in the Crooked Room

A thorough review of the literature included a plan of action for reading and analyzing the literature weekly and engaging in critical discourse with other scholars to develop thematic analysis across the literature. The review of literature included theoretical concepts such as Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000) and the White Racial Frame (Feagin, 2010). These concepts were the lens to understand the Community Cultural Wealth Model (Yosso, 2005) which informs the development of a grounded framework. The outcome of the systematic review established three categories relevant to Black women's leadership experience:

- Barriers to Leadership: Systems, Structures & Stumbling Blocks
- Resistance as Leaders: Skills and Strategy & Community Cultural Wealth
- Leadership in Action: Revolutionary Leadership & Cross-Sector Leadership

Each article was reviewed to determine how the outcomes provided empirical evidence of Black women's leadership skill development and practice. A major critique of early leadership scholarship is that it did not thoroughly inspect race, gender, or other levers of diversity as factors influencing leadership. Black people, more specifically Black women, were not highly represented in leadership roles that were studied thus, less likely to be contributors to early leadership theory literature and praxis. Limited evidence of Black women's leadership presence in the literature is a misrepresentation of the actual realities of their leadership contributions. The significance of their work is evident through other scopes of leadership experiences, suggesting Black women's practices are fundamentally different from their White counterparts (Santamaria, 2014).

Barriers to Leadership

In *Sister Citizen* (2011), Harris-Perry examines the systems and structures within the crooked room describing the politicized space structured to challenge Black women's development as leaders. Narratives about Black women's leadership describe gender and race bias prohibiting advancement, but do not interrogate how these systems are deeply rooted in whiteness. Bias in the workplace is a structural barrier to career mobility. Harris-Perry (2011) posits that the professional spaces that Black women are in are constructed by a narrow, contorted lens forcing them to navigate spaces "bombarded with warped images of their humanity" (p. 29). The disparate perceptions of Black women's leadership experience explain the gaps in understanding their professional and career development (Parlea-Buzatu, 2010).

Researchers have identified negative stereotyping, bias in performance evaluation systems, lack of support from manager, and limited informal networking with colleagues as structural barriers that inhibit Black women's advancement (Beckwith et al., 2016; Cain, 2015; Harris-Perry, 2011; Ngue et al., 2020). The compounded consequences of sexism and racism, identified as double jeopardy in leadership spaces, create stumbling blocks for Black women's career promotion and retention. Double jeopardy describes the experience of Black women who, labeled by negative stereotypes of gender and race, are still in pursuit of leadership roles (Beckwith et al., 2016; Jean-Marie et al., 2009). There are differing experiences based on the culture of an organization or administration, however the impact of double jeopardy is relevant to Black women leaders across industries (Grant, 2016; Jean-Marie et al., 2009). In a qualitative study of eight Black women pharmacists, Bonaparte (2016) explores the leadership behaviors of these women resulting in a list of approaches these women use to navigate their space. As leaders, they recognized the impact of their racial identities and, in turn, exercise deliberate

behaviors to align to the dominant culture of their organization by code switching to fit in (Apugo, 2019).

Henry (2010) studied careers of higher education professionals, and Richie et al. (1997) specifically focused on career development pathways across sectors. Both studies confirmed that the socio-political nature of race and gender impacts the career opportunities available to Black women. This is evident by the challenges that participants faced when trying to develop career plans without being afforded experiential learning related to new positions or lacked the professional mentor support to build their skills and capacity.

A common outcome from the research detailed the challenges that Black women faced as they worked twice as hard to prove their competence or work ethic as to counter the negative stereotypes of being Black and a woman. In a quantitative exploration of the consequences for leaders asserting dominance as a function of race and gender, Livingston et al., (2012) discovers that while there was no difference in the responses to Black women leaders and their White male counterparts in asserting leadership dominance, they saw significant differences in how the two groups were treated when leadership decisions were coded as "mistakes." Black women accepted penalties related to mistakes connected to work competencies while their white male counterparts did not. This experience furthers the notion that Black women leaders are experiencing the impact of biased systems that leave no room for error. Nobre et al. (2014) studied the concept of leadership derailment; the existence of a leader in a role, with identified skills and ability, who are then removed, demoted or without career promotion due to unforeseen occurrences. To support this idea, leadership derailment scholars identified internal and external factors associated with derailment. Table 2 represents an adapted version of those skills sourced

from Nobre et. al (2014). The factors listed align to the systems, structures, and stumbling blocks that senior-level Black women experience.

Table 2

Adaptation of the Leadership Derailment Factors

External Factors- Factors outside of women's control	**Internal Factors-- Trait and behaviors**
Gender Stereotyping	Leadership styles and behaviors
Gendered Occupations/Role Level	Wanting too much for oneself or other women
The 'glass ceiling' phenomenon	Interpersonal relationships and networks
Organizational Culture	Not managing strategy
Discrimination	Education and development

Source: Nobre et. al., 2014

The research referenced in the study provides context for the ways women are confined in roles, but it also supports the notion of the barriers that prevent their career mobility. The factors identified in Table 2 are aligned to the barriers listed as empirical evidence in the literature review.

The oppressive nature of these systems, structures, and stumbling blocks commits Black women to minor positions within society and professionally. According to "Women in the Labor Force" (2019), Black women earn less salary across industries and make up a greater percentage of low-wage earning roles in comparison to their White counterparts. Further research on the impact of race and gender on the perceptions of skill and ability related to demonstrated leadership practices has created disadvantages for Black women (Khosrovani & Ward, 2011). Included are inequities in pay, recruitment, and promotion across industries. Within the WRF, Black women are not seen as leaders, powerful, or worthy of any earned rights or positions.

Despite this experience, Black women leaders continue to practice a unique style of emerging leadership in response to the narrow views of Black women's leadership identities.

Resistance as Leaders

As Black women occupy leadership roles, they develop strategies to navigate the position and place in the organization. The pervasive nature of whiteness has manifested as white dominant culture in the workplace, creating systems and structures that challenge navigating the workplace. As a strategy, Black women learn to resist those limits and BFT expands the idea of what that looks like for Black women. These structures and systems have relegated Black women to roles and positions that have leadership titles but not authority or decision-making power. Santamaria (2014) conducted a qualitative study of six leaders that resulted in a list of common leadership characteristics for leaders of color. This list included navigating stereotype threat, initiating critical conversations, and honoring constituents which speak to the strategies imposed to advance Black women's leadership (Bonaparte, 2016; Oikelome, 2017; Sakho-Lewis, 2017; Santamaria, 2014). Oikelome (2017) conducted a phenomenological study of 13 college presidents, determining two key challenges to the progression of their careers: 1) challenges with identity structures and 2) challenges with organizational structures. Despite being in the highest roles, these leaders were directly impacted by the systems and structures, requiring that they implement navigational strategies to persist. Oikelome (2017) names one possible organizational navigation strategy to combat challenges as taking advantage of special opportunities and leveraging key mentors. Through a process of trial and error, earning roles and positions and experiencing derailment, Black women learn to construct their own leadership skills and practices that help them navigate the workplace.

Skills and Strategy

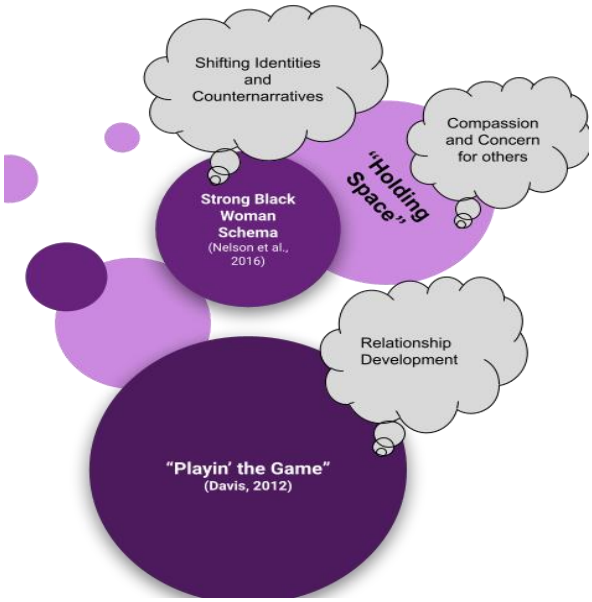
In review of the constructed skills and practices, empirical evidence is able to identify those that are relevant across industries. Nelson et al. (2016) gives the example of the strong Black women schema in instances where Black women adopt broad personas as either a proof point of skill or as counter-narrative; these performative behaviors operate as a strategy to their leadership practices. Similarly, the Black women in Davis' (2012) phenomenological study of Black women executives described this as "playing the game" (p. 165). Understandably this idea of a game is rooted in the white dominant systems and structures of organizations. Black women use these perceptions to determine the ways they intentionally develop relationships, involve themselves in many internal groups as a representative and necessary contributor while often extending group consensus as a decision-making strategy (Santamaria, 2014).

An additional strategy common across the experiences of the leaders among seven of the studies reviewed was the notion of honoring the individuals with whom leaders share space. The Black women leaders each felt it was their responsibility to see the humanity in their staff, students, families, and colleagues by including their voices and perspectives(Bonaparte, 2016; Davis, 2012; Greaux, 2010; Nelson et al., 2016; Oikelome, 2017; Sakho-Lewis, 2017; Santamaria, 2014). In Sakho-Lewis' (2017) study entitled *Black Activist Mothering: Teach Me About What Teaches You*, she names this strategy as "holding space" (p. 14). Space holding is the action of "facilitating relationships between people, space, place and time" and this tool allows Black women to engage with people without judgement and in fairness, thus exemplifying the epitome of leadership (Sakho-Lewis, 2017, p. 14). Many of the studies involved Black women in various settings and validates the proof of the multifaceted approaches and strategies that Black women employ. Figure 2 represents the emerging leadership skills and

practices that are elevated as a result of societal structures and workplace politics evident in the literature.

Figure 2

Emerging Leadership Skills and Practices from the Literature



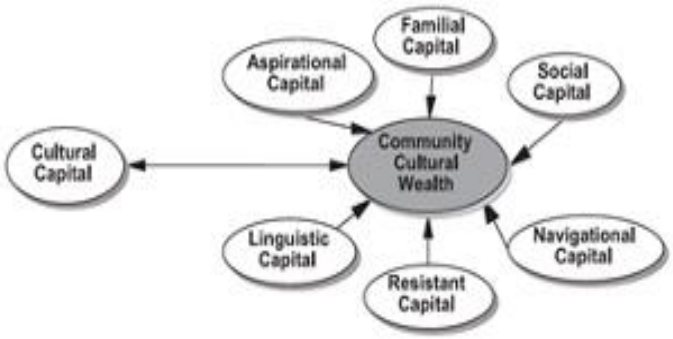
Throughout the literature and while conducting the study, additional skills and practices were identified, developing an initial conceptual framework of the connection between the skills senior-level Black women employ and their racialized, gendered, and socio-cultural experiences within theoretical frameworks. Some of these skills and strategies were developed in response to adversity and others represent a sacred ancestral practice that is true to Black women's cultural experiences. Many of the studies engaged leaders in various regions, across sectors, and with multiple research methods providing evidence of the complex and sophisticated tools and strategies that Black women exercise.

Community Cultural Wealth

Inherent to Black women's leadership, history and socio-political factors influence Black women's practice (Alston, 2012). Yosso's (2005), community cultural wealth model illustrates the resourcefulness and skills that communities of color use to resist and exist in society. This critical analysis of cultural experience offers insight into the way Black women leverage their cultural influence to inform their leadership. It has a direct impact on the ability to navigate varying institutions connected to their careers. In Figure 3, Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth Model depicts the six cultural assets identified as relevant to communities of color.

Figure 3

Community Cultural Wealth Model



Source: Yosso, 2005

The interlaced cultural capitals together create a detailed view of community cultural wealth. In the review of the literature, the empirical studies provide data substantiating the utility of the cultural capital framework as it relates to Black women leadership skills and practice.

Aspirational Capital. This pertains to one's ability to focus on hope and envision possibilities within the future even when faced with adversity. Evidence of this has been represented by Black women's activism toward a better future. Black women like Harriet Tubman, Angela Davis, and Shirley Chisolm demonstrated this through their fight for liberation

and equal opportunities for Black people. Elders like grandparents, mommas, and aunties also are great examples of how this capital is activated today as they are a reminder of what is possible and often the motivation behind it. Dr. Bettina Love wrote *We Want to Do More than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom* (2019) and interprets this capital as "Freedom Dreaming" as expressed by Black joy. In this sense, "joy becomes the performance of hope amidst resistance" (Love, 2019, p. 101). Aspirational capital presents in multiple avenues and forms that are associated with spiritual grounding, morals, joy, and divine hope (Alexander, 2010). Undeterred by the barriers to access or challenges with identity politics, Black women evoke a sense of leadership qualifying their skills to lead by envisioning the possibilities of the future (Alston, 2012; Santamaria, 2014). This capital can be intangible, yet the magnitude of its value is evident in expressions of vision setting working toward change.

Familial Capital. Familial capital is exemplified by an unwavering commitment to community well-being (Rosser-Mims, 2010). This is explored through difference and collective ideas of sameness which connects Black women through familial kinship fostered by lived experience (Crenshaw, 1989; Rosser-Mims, 2010). This kinship can be experienced through mentorship or more informal spaces like Black churches or social clubs that are safe spaces that resist stereotypes and affirms Black identity development (Tatum, 2010).Throughout the research, when Black women were asked about factors impacting their success, they often described mentorship programming, sister circles, sororities, and other groups for them to build and nurture relationships (Alexander, 2010; Nelson et al., 2016; Oikelome, 2017). At times, when these spaces are racially homogenous, this creates opportunities for Black women to suspend performative behaviors and show-up as their true selves. In cases where their professional communities prevent that, Black women participants across studies identified

immediate family (husbands, friends, parents, etc.) as critical supports in their roles (Alexander, 2010; Nelson et al., 2016; Richie et al., 1997).

Social Capital. Social networks or community resources that have a sense of community are sources of social capital. This network of community members operates as a support system and a source of motivation or provides direct access to someone who can do either. Black women leaders are a part of many groups that are categorized by organizations, service to the community, religious connections, professional affinity groups, personal interest organizations, and even geographic relations. Black women's participation creates access to social capital to gain access to positions of power, to influence, or to resources.

A study conducted by Curtis (2017) that included eight Black women explored the connection between gender and leadership management. As many of the Black women leveraged these groups as reinforcement, social networks were identified as necessary supports to their professional work (Curtis, 2017). The advantage of these networks for Black women started with a resource and developed as platform to advance professionally.

Navigational Capital. Navigational capital refers to the ability to move through institutions and spaces that were not designed for communities of color (Yosso, 2005). Navigating through institutions established in whiteness requires Black women to actively refuse to succumb to the pressures of that space through resistance (hooks, 2014). Those pressures result in code-switching behaviors that force Black women to strategically share or hide their identities to engage others. This connects to Collins' (2000) idea that Black Feminist Thought extends our thinking about Black women are and how they operate. Sakho-Lewis in "Black Activist Mothering: Teach Me About What Teaches You" (2017) describes this skill as "veil walking" which is the act of "navigating between systems to learn and transport knowledge and requires the entire body to intensely see not only the system of the problem but also, how the

system is informed by and nested within structure and historical systems" (p. 14). White dominant culture has been operationalized in organizations creating a maze of barriers to leadership, thus using veil walking as a way to navigate the workplace.

As more Black women occupy senior leadership roles, they continue to be hyperaware to all the unwritten rules and policies requiring calculated measures to maintain acceptance in the spaces. One way Black women navigate these spaces is building consensus amongst colleagues and others to encourage a shifting perspective of who they are. These additional steps that monitor bias against them is countered with strong images of self and their natural inclination to involve others in building networks to develop a range of perspectives (Jean-Marie et al., 2009; Oikelome, 2017) The relationship between Black women's leadership practice and historical lived experiences represent a nuanced influence on the strategies imposed to navigate professional spaces.

Resistant Capital. This is developed by the insight and ingenuity learned from oppositional behaviors. Resistant capital operates in spaces of "political warfare" and is used to sustain existence when faced with insurmountable odds (Lorde, 2017, p. 130). Consider the stereotypes that we see in the media about Black women. The stereotypes and images include being sexually aggressive, having curvy bodies, serving as laborers, and having untamed hair. These are not uncommon labels associated with Black women because of their historical relevance to names like Jezebel, Mammy and Sapphire (Harris-Perry, 2011; West, 2008). These archetypes viewed through a lens of whiteness are damaging to Black women's image. In the workplace the White gaze positions Black women leaders to be subjects of workplace policies that stand in opposition to cultural forms of expression and subjects them to shame and enmity. However, this form of capital forces a counter-story that speaks to how Black women present themselves as strong, and worthy of respect (Jean-Marie et al., 2009; Nelson et al., 2016).

A negative outcome of resistant capital can be the coping mechanism like "identity shifting" as illustrated by masking behaviors adopted by Black women as survival mechanisms (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 58). This forces Black women to use code-switching behaviors to navigate professional spaces and years of this performance has mental and health implications (Richie et al., 1997). The harmful effect of shifting identities for long periods of time ingrains these performative behaviors, increases stress and when Black women realize the impact it is too late unlearn these socializations.

Linguistic Capital. Linguistic capital is a testament to the multilingualism of communities of color. Language is critiqued if it is different from what is often described as standard English. For example, the use of Ebonics is condemned as lazy and improper, yet Rickford et al. (2004) suggests that Ebonics comes with sophisticated speech patterns and nuanced dialect. Members of the Black community are natural orators defying the limits of group communication with loud voices, short words, and highly expressive verbiage. Language is not always verbal and Black women use non-verbal cues or sounds to communicate. These ways of communication translate to Black women's ability to communicate across lines of power, position, and place. Being able to effectively communicate verbally or nonverbally with teams, clients and other leadership is an expected leadership qualification.

The expansive nature of language extends to regional dialects, colloquialisms and to what Sakho-Lewis (2017) describes as "Gumbo Ya"; a tool that allows for critical connections between multiple stories across space and time. Throughout the timeline of history, speech as a tool and practice also exhibited as a risk. Black women being vocal could result in violence or harm and thus Black women have adopted language practices by osmosis through time, place, space and spirit. Language is an advanced form of capital that Black women leaders use in multiple forms of speech, switching as their environment changes. Culturally language and

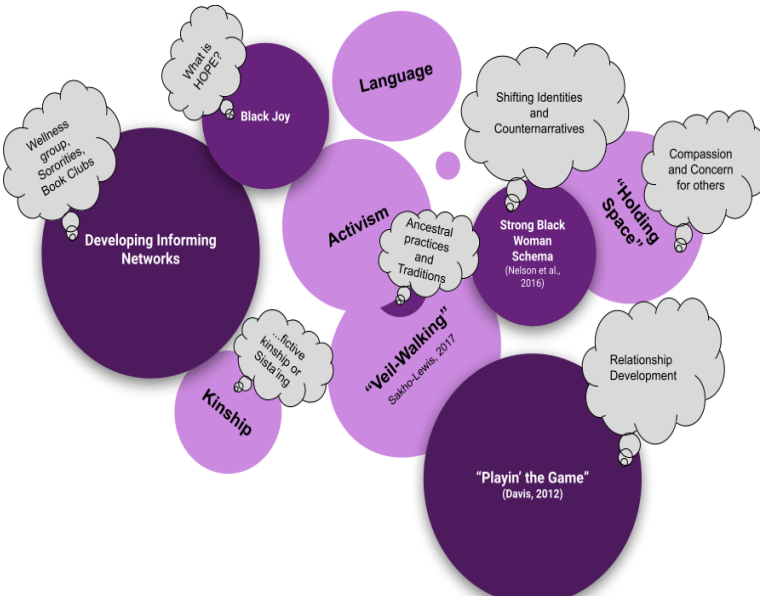
communication can be expressed through idioms and colloquialisms and various forms of art. Black women also use an academic approach to language that provides context for what and how they should communicate (Bonaparte, 2016; Santamaria, 2014). This academic language can be influenced by literature, world geographies and uses complex and sophisticated speech patterns. Black women's linguistic dexterity is both a strategic and expansive tool supplementing their leadership practice. The cultural assets presented by Yosso (2005) present a nuanced explanation for the skills and practices of Black women leaders. For instance, linguistic capital becomes a way to explore more broadly communication practices.

Conclusion

Community cultural wealth is an avenue by which Black women leaders can reframe their culture and history and adopt affirming language to describe their skills and practice. This model uses a sociocultural lens to understand their practice. Criticizing Black women's use of language, community building and other forms of expression it prohibits their leadership from being fully recognized. Societal structures force Black women to bend and break to meet the standard idea of a leader, and sometimes to their detriment. Black women commit to participating in these conditions to be retained or promoted professionally. One way to counter those narratives is to explore and identify the influential assets that inform Black women's leadership skills and practice. Figure 4 continues to build on the leadership skills and practices displayed in Figure 2 that are surfacing through the literature.

Figure 4

Emerging Leadership Skills and Practices from the Literature v. 2



Leadership in Action

Leaders who are reflective and practice a multidimensional approach to their leadership present a value-add to organizations (Bonaparte, 2016; Santamaría, 2014). In an effort to diversify organizations it is important to understand the outcomes of the Horsford (2012) study focused on Black women's practice of bridge leadership. The analysis suggested that race and gender complicate the existence of leadership; however, Black women leaders are able to connect, create and are concerned with the work experiences of others. Black women continue to represent as engaging leaders despite their personal experiences.

Revolutionary Leadership

Paulo Freire (1972) introduces the idea of revolutionary leaders in his discourse of theory and practice. These leaders understand the people, their conditions, and work in solidarity supported by the idea that "the people must find themselves in the emerging leaders and the latter

must find themselves in the people" (Freire, 1972, p. 176) . Freire's (1972) work invites leaders to redefine their roles in relation to power. In the Horsford (2012) study of the historical practice of bridge leadership, the results confirm Freire's (1972) notion of the authority that exists within grassroots and community focused leaders. The Black women in Horsford's (2012) study represented leaders in a position that evoked change and shifted their school cultures to advance diversity, equity, and social justice efforts.

Black women have adapted to the socio-political identities bestowed upon them as leaders who constantly do work in service to others (Harris-Perry, 2011; Horsford, 2012; Rosser-Mims, 2010). In service to marginalized groups, Freire (1972) suggests that educators are uniquely positioned to provide a liberatory "theory of action" that creates opportunity for the oppressed (Freire, 1972, p. 156). This opportunity is evident in the leadership techniques that focus on collective wellness (Rosser-Mims, 2010). Black women leaders developed a practice that sees "themselves as the solution to other people's problems and their effort and concern is almost always other-directed" (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 83). The strength and authority displayed by Black women leaders is connected to their communities. Sakho-Lewis (2017) states that Black women exercise traditional practices of community engagement with great brilliance. This practice is rooted in the ability to see the humanity in people and operationalize opportunities of hope. Black women's approach to leadership is multidimensional and should be celebrated as we understand more about how our leadership is developed.

Cross Sector Leadership

Becker & Smith (2018) identified a set of leadership qualifications specific to cross-sector leaders. The list of skills is related to how one might build a team or solve problems while working toward organizational achievements. Although the list is not exhaustive, it does provide

some context for leadership qualifications that are transferable across sectors. Diehl & Dzubinski (2016) conducted a cross-sector analysis using comparative data across two studies. The researchers developed a list of common barriers to leadership for women providing narratives related to their experience at the micro, meso and macro levels. More specifically, it included barriers like lack of "mentorship, communication style constraints and scrutiny" (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016, p. 187). This literature was limited as it only addresses the gendered experience mainly focusing on barriers while Horsford (2012) grounds the research in both race and gender and focuses on bridge leadership as a critical skill. Each of the studies provided an analysis of identified leadership barriers and skills relevant to leadership across industries. As a contrast to the experiences of senior-level leaders, Dickens & Chavez, (2018) completed a phenomenological study of early career Black women leaders. The analysis showed that with less than three years of leadership experience, Black women leaders experience the same barriers and in similar ways make use of the socio-cultural skills developed from historical and lived experiences. Silver & Jansen (2017) describes the value of cross-sector affiliations as it increased the skills for leaders. Having worked in multiple environments increases the leadership knowledge and capacity. Although Black women are working as cross-sector leaders, they are still challenged by the conditions of their work environment and they all use strategic skills to navigate the space.

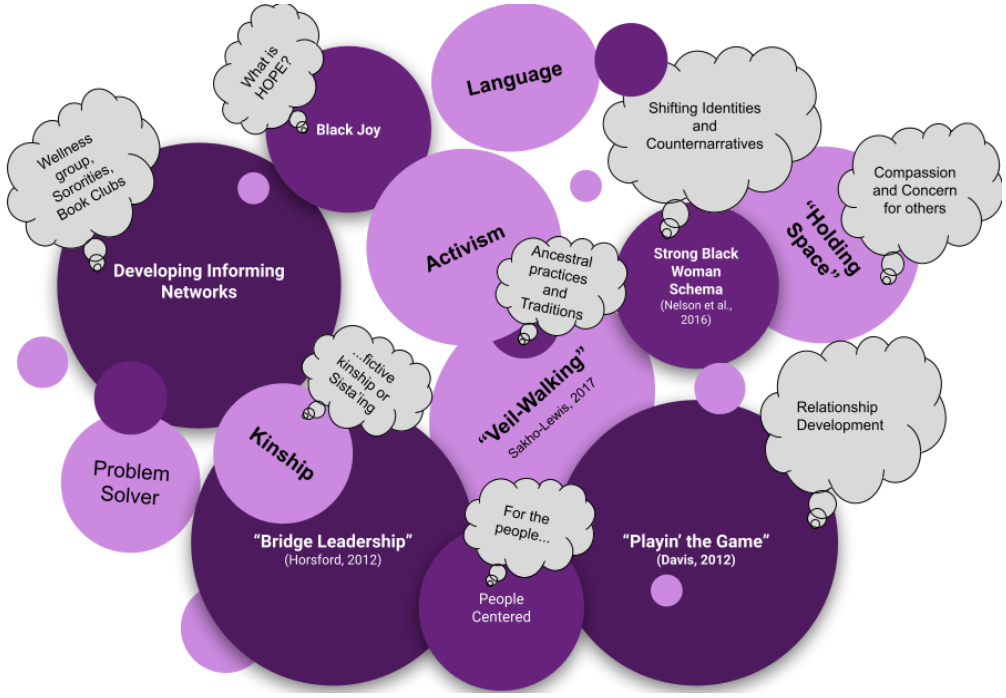
Summary

A thorough review of the literature provides empirical evidence of the experiences of Black women leaders relevant to their racialized, gendered and cultural experiences. Much of the early research was focused on gendered experiences, however the literature has emerged to include both race and gender as a construct for understanding Black women's leadership. Race

and gender as a factor without the context for culture limits the understanding of Black women's experience. Yosso's (2005) scholarship on cultural capital extends the idea that the socio-cultural assets communities of color have are a distinctive set of skills and practices informed by their lived experiences. Graphically presented in Figure 5 are a number of other socio-cultural capitals and ideas relevant to Black women's leadership skills and practices evident in the literature.

Figure 5.

Emerging Leadership Skills and Practices from the Literature v. 3



Black women's multifaceted existence is influenced by forced identities, both real and fabricated creating a complicated dynamic between their individual identity development and their leadership identity. The literature provides insight into the ways Black women have navigated their leadership practices. This calls for a deeper exploration of the intersectionality between race, gender, and culture to understand the impact it has on Black women's leadership identity and the leadership skills and practices that are developed as a result.

Chapter 4: Methodology: Inquiry, Exploration & Grounded Research

Qualitative research methods are used when the goal is to explain a phenomenon by using data from individual experiences. This qualitative study used a grounded theory approach focused to inspect the connections between race, gender, culture, and Black women's leadership practice (Birks & Mills, 2015; Charmaz, 2006).

Researcher Identity and Connections

My introduction to leadership was catalyzed by my personal interest in solving problems, helping others, and making decisions that would have great impact. Like many of the participants my introduction to leadership was sparked by someone believing I could do it. There were mentors, teachers, and managers who pushed my thinking and practice with very high expectations. I recall my experience with an early supervisor who led with such care and accountability. She was highly supportive and believed I could do the work, but she also didn't accept my word for anything—she wanted the data. Proof. Evidence of the work I had done. She was the first leader who really practiced a data-informed strategy and believed in showing up prepared and committed to seeing outcomes. Following her leadership, I took a role with a woman who had a strong leadership presence and work ethic focused on details, direction and most importantly she strategically leveraged her network. I learned a lot from these two leaders early in my career and one learning has become central to my practice—Leaders create space for leadership. I use this as guide as I aspire to be a cross-sector, data-driven leader committed to learning and developing with the lens of race, gender and culture while focused on creating space for others. This has been my approach to leadership in many different capacities in the non-profit and education industries. My interest in developing others and creating opportunities to build

individual capacity has evolved over time. To understand more about leadership at the senior-level my scholarship is focused on the ways Black women experience leadership. To learn more about Black women's leadership experiences, we talked and shared stories with each other. Together we explained the skills and practices employed and, in the process, discovered how this was impact by race, gender and culture.

This research begins with the initial phase of personal inquiry. I started by introspectively thinking about my own leadership experiences and connecting that to the leaders in my life. I ruminated on the leadership of my Sunday-School teacher and the Dean of my college, who motivated me through my professional career. I thought deeply about the approach of my former colleagues who were the school registrar and counselors and who somehow had the time and energy to always do so much more. Then there were questions about navigating leadership and relationships with my first boss who had a graceful balance of careful concern and high expectations. Naturally, I was interested in making the connection between how I lead and what they taught me, which only surfaced lots of "remember when" stories and very few concrete answers. A grounded theory is inductively developed during a study and in constant interaction with the data from that study, making my personal question a strong entry point for this work (Maxwell, 2013).

Methods: "I sees it clear."

Grounded theory creates a flexible yet evolving method of data collection that has consistent engagement among the researcher, the participants, and the data collected (Birks & Mills, 2015; Charmaz, 2006). In the context of this study, this approach was a constant loop of 'what about this" and "this reminds me of" throughout each phase of the work. Grounded theory focuses on developing new knowledge to explain a theory or practice, and this study engaged

Black women to develop an understanding of their leadership practices by sharing their narratives (Birks & Mills, 2015).

Charmaz (2006) introduces the constructivist approach to learn more about the human experience and how it relates to a concept or idea within the society or culture. It reminds me of a phrase my auntie uses; “I sees it clear.” This is her affirmation of understanding but also a subtle commitment to envisioning the possibility without the confines and bounds of external factors. This study focused on *seeing clearly* Black women’s leadership skills and practices and how historical and socio-cultural experiences impact how those are developed. This interpretive understanding of Black women’s leadership will contribute to emerging frames related to Black women’s practice (Charmaz, 2006). These ideas are rooted in the human experience - the Black women’s experience - and it is important to understand this as a critical point of grounding in the research. The constructivist approach to the grounded theory method aims to examine Black women’s leadership skills and practice and collaboratively build on their questions and exploration of their personal experiences to use this data to illustrate a grounded framework model for us, by us (Charmaz, 2006). As experts of their own experience, each participant contributed by completing a questionnaire, participant in multiple focus groups, and responding to a final questionnaire to review the framework and study outcomes.

Research Design

The 15 senior-level cross-sector Black women participants were committed and engaged throughout the study. The literature of similar qualitative studies engaged about the same number of participants. The process for setting up this study was important to creating the right environment for the women to share. The research plan included procedures for recruitment, data collection, and analysis. Creswell (2013) describes the familiar qualitative responses collected in

a study as saturation which was met after each woman completed a leadership questionnaire and participated in two focus groups. At this point in the process, data collection ended, and the data was analyzed to solidify the grounded theory of their leadership skills and practices.

Recruitment

Among Black women there is a network of sisters who show up and support in big ways for each other. Recruiting for this study was a great example of that. I invited my closest network via email with a link to an eligibility survey (Appendix B) to identify the Black women who fit the study parameters:

- At least two years of experience in a senior-level (c-suite/VP/Senior Admin) role in any industry
- Willing to complete a leadership survey (Appendix C)
- Willing to participate in 2 focus groups (60-90mins) via zoom.

With those parameters and by connecting with my network via email, I was able to identify 15 participants who fully participated. The sampling methods are aligned to the five possible goals described by Maxwell (2013) used to justify the connection between myself and the participants as well as the validation for using a snowball method to ensure there were enough participants with industry and role variation. Maxwell (2013) suggests that one possible goal of purposeful sampling is to identify a group of participants that would be critical to collecting the data needed and that is also supported by the need to have a variety of perspectives from participants. Although concerns of reactivity may exist, that is countered by the very intentional effort to have a relationship with participants in order to encourage authentic responses. The nature of the study involved psychological and emotional input and having participants with similar identities, those

who were perceivably effective in their role and identified by someone who recommended them to the study was important to getting all of the research questions answered (Maxwell, 2013).

Participants. All of the women completed a demographic survey used to confirm meeting the study requirements and to collect relevant information which was used as descriptors for the data analysis tool. Table 3 includes the key descriptors categorized for the data analysis. To ensure anonymity, the specific role titles, participant names, and company names have been removed.

Table 3.

Participant Demographics

Participant	Industry	Title	Direct Reports	Region
1	Education	Senior Admin	5-9	Southeast
2	Cross-sector	C-suite	10+	Southwest
3	Education	Senior Admin	10+	Northeast
4	Non-profit	C-suite	0-4	Northeast
5	Education	C-suite	5-9	Northeast
6	Media	VP	5-9	Northeast
7	Education	C-suite	5-9	Midwest
8	Technology	VP	10+	Southeast
9	Financial Services	VP	10+	Southeast
10	Education	VP	5-9	Southeast
11	Non-profit	VP	0-4	Southeast
12	Education	Senior Admin	0-4	Southeast
13	Education	Senior Admin	0-4	Southeast
14	Education	Senior Admin	0-4	Southeast
15	Cross-sector	VP	0-4	Southeast

Data Collection

The study was conducted in three phases. The first step was to collect the demographic information of potential participants which yielded 23 contacts. The next phase focused on eligibility which yielded 15 total participants determined by their completion of the Leadership Questionnaire (Appendix C) and consent to participate (Appendix D). Following the completion of the leadership questionnaire, participants were reminded of the two upcoming focus groups via email that included the overall study procedure and details on the data collection. All the data was audio and video recorded by a secured digital video platform (zoom) which provided a transcript of the conversation. The transcripts were reviewed and uploaded to the Dedoose software.

Once the transcriptions were verified by the audio, they were linked to the participant ID numbers within the data analysis software. I developed a codebook using context from the literature and ideas from my comprehensive exam which explored possible ideas and connections between the frameworks and related studies. Additional codes were developed during multiple reads of the transcripts and from emerging ideas through the memos. I began with over 400 codes developed from the literature, the conceptual framework and others were grounded in the study. The codes were organized by question and ultimately combined similar ideas or related skills to create a more finite list of codes. Through a systematic approach to reading, thinking, memoing, reading, and mapping I was able to develop iterations of the identified skills and the related behaviors and practices. As a way to check the data, I conducted member checks by sharing these notes with participants before each focus group and connected with participants as needed individually between focus groups to listen to any updates or ideas in

between the sessions. Insights from the discussions were added as a media sources and coded with the analysis software.

Setting

Due to the pandemic guidelines, social distancing has been a required safety measure. In the case of my study, it limited the study setting to virtual but also allowed for participant group from different regions of the U.S. I collected the data through collaborative discussions using "dialogical voice" (the act of listening, writing, and conversing in one's culture point of reference) which is an intentional method of the Black feminist framework (Evans-Winters, 2019). This method employs a shared curiosity between participants and their experience, while allowing me to critique my own experience and how it shapes the analysis of the data. My intent in creating a space similar to that of being "with the girls" or engaging in our group chats, was important to engaging in reflexive discourse to augment the data collection (Maxwell, 2013).

In Community

This cultural point of reference for this study was setting up the focus groups as a communal space between participants. A total of three focus groups were conducted in round one and four focus groups were conducted in round two. Each participant self-selected into the into the session of their choice. This created a mixed group from one session to the next and allowed for the women to connect and engage with multiple participants.

At the start of each focus group, each woman introduced herself and shared a personal anecdote. This icebreaker quickly created a sense of familiarity that sparked some connections. Each session started with a moment to exhale. We took a deep breath at the start and some women even shared why the space was so important. In each focus group, someone started by expressing their gratitude for the space "because being Black at work is exhausting." Those

sentiments were echoed and led the conversation right into the discussion. The audio was filled with laughs, tears, and moments of silence as the women told one story after the next, encouraged one another, and in some moments affirmed each other with a pointed finger across the screen or you heard a sound bite of "Yesssssssss! That part." The conversation in each focus group was about the systems and structures that have forced Black women's leadership practice within environments that challenge their existence.

Approaches to Analysis

Using the constructivist approach, the conceptual framework changed as new information was collected. The new information informed the focus group protocol, and I adjusted the framing from one engagement to the next. Coding and memoing were used to organize emerging ideas and themes throughout the focus groups. Memo writing is a reflective activity that is both objective and necessary to processing the data and inform the direction of the study (Birks & Mills, 2015). It allows the researcher to actively think about and process the data and make connections. In writing the memos, I chose to intentionally see the experience and listen to the stories as critical data points. Together the women affirmed and challenged, supported and redefined their leadership one question after the next. Charmaz (2006) describes memoing and thematic analysis as reshaping your data which allows the researcher to refine and expand the knowledge and I did so through written and verbal methods. My memoing process included recording shorts video of myself processing the focus group content talking through the experience, revisiting side conversations, and connecting the dots between experience and practice through media.

While reading, writing and a thinking about the data collected, I found myself limited by my own language. There were times while coding and memoing, that I realized my vocabulary

was insufficient in describing an idea or I was unable to articulate a concept. I leveraged conversations with my chair and other scholars to think collaboratively about the analysis, yet I needed additional language support. Evans-Winters (2019) posits that "data analysis engages a multiplicity of text in Black feminist qualitative inquiry" (p. 24). This created an opportunity to interpret study data using many sources to support analysis. Evans -Winters (2019) conveyed that using "visual art, fiction, poetry, music and storytelling are creative and culturally congruent with Black women's ways of sharing experience and conveying messages" (p. 25). This conception resonated with my approach to thinking and processing as a scholar. It created space for me to use music, storytelling, poetry, and visuals as a way to reckon with the narratives and contend with the significance of the Black women's leadership experience.

Throughout the dissertation I listened to music and used it as a tool with participants to interpret the connectivity of race, gender, culture and leadership experience. Using music as a tool was an analytical approach that supported me in making sense of the Black women's leadership experiences. Interestingly, I found that the women in my study also used music "as a pre-recorded social support" necessary to their daily activities (White, 2021). The track list in appendix A represents a culturally appropriate inspection of the participants' experiences represented in song selections.

The importance of using multiple sources, is evident in the approach to the data collection. This was supported by the approach to analysis which also included multiple rounds of coding and aggregating the data across key indicators. The analysis considered initial ideas in the questionnaire layered that with data collected in two rounds of focus groups while considering input from the final review of the findings. To rigorously analyze the data from multiple perspectives, I coded the data in multiple rounds and then used a matrix to analyze

themes and ideas across multiple indicators including, industry, role title, region and direct reports. I wanted to learn more through the analysis about areas of difference and similarity and critically reviewed the data outcomes that would influence the framework.

Data Validation

Throughout the study, there were multiple methods to validating the data collected. Creswell (2013) describes validation as a way to "emphasize a process" which is used to document the accuracy of perspectives that could be highlighted thematically or by identifying more concrete concepts or ideas (p. 250). In this study, the first step in validating the data was multiple rounds of coding and connecting similar codes by the narratives of the participants. This process occurred after each focus group and any member check conversations or notes sent to supplement that focus group. I used visuals during the focus groups, as a process for member checking and validating the data previously collected. This connected the narratives to the literature and the concepts from the theoretical frameworks. With feedback from the participants, I continued with the coding and memoing process. To apply a rigorous approach to the analysis, the codes were used as a first phase of analysis. This was followed by organizing ideas and concepts in a matrix that cross referenced the data in four ways: 1) noting the number of participants who had similar thinking or responses, 2) aggregating the data collected by industry, role, number of direct reports and region, 3) noting whether or not the skills and practices were explicitly named or described and 4) used multiple sources to help name and identify the skills and create a collaborative definition and consensus for naming the skills.

Themes in the data were determined through this matrix noting the occurrence of the skills and the details shared around those skills and practices. The themes were validated by having at least 12 of the 15 participants identify these skills and practices through narratives,

identifying key experiences and/or naming them explicitly. As codes were identified or collapsed into each other, I noted that some codes occurred more often together. For example, when coding for communication related data, the codes included language, speech patterns, communication and tone. In most cases through the analysis, they were coded together or with similar examples. This is also true for coding for the practice of faith. Every participant named faith or a spiritual practice and shared stories that suggested there faith provided a strong sense of moral direction. This multi-layered approach to the analysis grounded the study outcomes in the experiences and data collected. This provides further evidence of the influence of race, gender and culture.

Limitations

The limitations, as defined by Creswell (2013) and Maxwell (2013), include examples of bias, the volume of data and the impact of the researcher's presence in the focus group. While I learned so much from this research in community with Black women with varying lived experiences, the time together felt limited. My role while engaging was to also add critical questions to the conversation that would sometimes take us on a tangent because this space for some was cathartic. I was intentional in creating a space for them to share and discuss their leadership practices but realized that we all needed time to breathe, together, in community as a moment of healing before we could focus forward. This was a part of my own personal care during the study as I was aware of my feelings about my own leadership experience.

Additionally, the delimitations of this research are set as a guide to the research study (Creswell, 2013). The focus of this study is on Black women leaders in senior- level roles across industries. Senior-level cross-sector Black women are interlopers within the workplace with a distinctive leadership experience and practice. Therefore, this research centers their experiences and seeks to understand more about their leadership skills and practice through the lens of race,

gender, and culture. The goal was and still is to deeply understand the influence of their intersectional identities to have implications for future studies on leadership theory and practice, as well as practical implications for organizational change.

Summary

What follows is a discussion of the methods used to conduct this study. In doing so, I introduced each participant to a pre-determined list of leadership skills and practices informed by the literature. This list was shared with each participant in a questionnaire where they identified which skills were most relevant to their practice. The leadership questionnaire inquired about the Black women's approach to leadership, the influence of race, gender and culture as well as ideas about how the women describe their leadership practice. The data collected was used to present data to the participants in focus group 1 followed by a discussion about the relevancy of these skills and then to further explore the influence of race, gender and culture. The data from phase 1 of the study was used to further develop the background to their leadership as well determine what key stills were significant to their practice. During focus group 2, participants were able to provide additional narratives and explanations for their practice and respond to an emerging framework that highlighted key skills and behaviors. The second focus group not only reacted to feedback and critique but also was structured to explain very clearly the context for why and how Black women lead. In each focus group we talked deeply about at what it takes to be Black and woman and a leader and the implications for this professional and personally.

Chapter 5: Findings: Skills, Practice and Intersectionality

The structure of this chapter is organized by each research question and identifies themes from the leadership questionnaire (phase one) and from the focus group dialogues (phase two). I present my findings from the study by describing the process of building on participant knowledge and experiences shared during data collection. Research questions one and two frame this chapter, as those two questions are foundational to the data collected in anticipation of the third research question. Research question three is discussed in the following chapter as it will focus on the grounded framework. In this chapter and the next, individual responses and specific accounts of participant experiences are noted to make connections between Black women's lived experiences and their leadership practice.

Research Question 1: Leadership Skills and Practice

The first research question of the study was designed to give the Black women the opportunity to use their voice to describe their leadership skills and practice in community with each other. I used the pre-identified skills within the leadership questionnaire to encourage the participants to think about their leadership skills and practices. These initial skills and practices were common in the literature and relevant to their roles. The leadership questionnaire identified 16 skills and I used a systematic coding process to identify which of the skills respondents believed were critical and most relevant to their practice.

I introduced this list of skills and practices in focus group one and had each participant respond to how applicable they were to their practice and the ways in which they used those skills. Each participant had the opportunity to also name additional skills and practices that were relevant and describe the ways in which they employ them. A list of skills identified from all

survey responses included compassion, shared leadership, communication, outreach and engagement and being a subject matter expert. The words in the list included compassion, shared leadership, communication, outreach, engagement, people management and subject matter expert. Figure 6 is a visual used to engage participants with the list of practices and skills and circled are those that were most referenced in the analysis.

Figure 6

Leadership Skills and Practice Visual 1

This conversation continued as the women explored Yosso's (2005) work with the community cultural wealth (CCW). During focus group one and with affirmation from others, Participant 5 noted that she thought this would be a "frame to discuss our leadership beyond, 'they're just strong and are able to figure things out,' it's more complex than that." To support this claim, twelve of the fifteen participants mentioned how the CCW could be used to unpack experiences and make the connection to how they might explain their leadership in a way that makes their practice different from their colleagues. Participant 15 stated that in this discourse "we can honor the ways in which we contribute" to the workplace. Her statement was embraced with head nods and smiles, followed by an immediate response adding another perspective about their leadership

experience. Participant 8 responded by describing the confidence she brings to her space because of her experience with being in spaces with lots of Black people in leadership.

The differing of opinions and perspectives amongst the group are an illustration of Collins (2000) work telling the story of Black women's experience, noting the ways they are both different and similar. The constant negotiation of power and politics of these senior-level Black women leaders lends itself to the theoretical concepts of BFT (Collins, 2000) and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), describing the dynamics between multiple social systems that interrogate accounts of race, gender and culture (Harris & Leonardo, 2018). To grapple with the many ways that Black women Leaders describe their practice, I thematically describe their leadership in two ideas: engaging people and leadership behavior. These two ideas were supported with evidence of their individual and collective experiences and provides context for the how they practice as leaders.

Engaging People

The first theme identified within the data was about the way Black women engage people. People engagement is a consistent part of their practice and is categorized by three key areas: 1) teams, 2) community and 3) personally. This section describes how the participants provided evidence of their people engagement practices.

Team. Harris-Perry's (2011) description of the ways in which Black women's approach is often directed at others and in service to others, was validated by the women's stories about shared leadership practices. In an attempt to provide direct feedback, coaching, and support these women gave examples of leadership that leveraged team member strengths and does so by leading with empathy. Each participant discussed her people-centered approach to leadership which shows up as being focused on "building relationships" (Participants 2, 4, 6, 8, 11, 12, and

14) on teams, “being collaborative” (5,7,9 and 15), making a concerted effort “to make space for all voices” (Participants 2, 3, and 14) and developing their people by “sharing the responsibility and consistently building consensus” (Participants 1, 2, 4, 6, 8, 11, 12, 13 and 14) in order to move the work forward. Participant 13 stated, “I want [my team] to feel as if we are walking together and doing the work instead of them walking behind me. It's all about partnership.” This was a common description of how senior-level Black women leaders engaged their teams, communities and the broader organization.

Community. As leaders with roles that not only impact their organizations internally, the women in the study described how they were able to apply their people engagement skills when working with people in the community. In their roles, all participants had responsibilities for community outreach or external stakeholders (contingent upon the sector) and specifically the educators provided direct service to targeted populations. For instance, each leader who worked in education, for a non-profit or in financial services described instances where she had to make recommendations for or have the need to develop strategic relationships with the community. Participant 4 pointed out that institutional racism and systems of oppression “impacts our decision-making processes” and described how as a Black woman she is hyperaware of how those systems impact Black communities. She noted that her work with students and external groups always centers the people.

Similarly, Participant 10 spoke to her ability to understand multiple perspectives and experiences, specifically of those who have been historically marginalized. In all of the conversations, the educators and non-profit leaders highlighted their practice of keeping students, families and communities centered in the work. Participant 11 shared that her role as a leader was also to support team members in identifying who she calls “environmental leaders” or

people within the community who have influence and power. Similarly, Participant 7 underscored how her role in working on fiscal strategies for a district "required her to make the connections with families" to share district decisions. The women in industries with service-oriented roles identify people engagement and outreach as a critical skill. Participant 2 described how that community engagement is "connected to high levels of inclusion" and in many ways focused on the "advancement of our community" (Participant 4). As leaders, these women's regard for community in every sense is important to their work.

Personal. Building community connections as professional relationships is just one way these women developed their network. In focus group one, Participant 9 raised the idea of community being very personal. In a time where the numbers of senior-level Black women leaders are few in number, she recognized "other Black women as the community she needs for support and guidance". In focus group two, Participant 5 calls it the "secret sisterhood that people want access to." Community in this sense represented a network of woman with connections across industries, roles, and locations. This community of Black women leaders is set up to provide support and motivation as well as accountability. Participant 6 gave this type of community great meaning when she shared her recollection of a social media post that read "Behind every Black woman is a group chat." She is describing this collective of women who share lived experiences, have common histories and rely on each other to move forward (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989; Rosser-Mims, 2010). Participant 10 stated that, "…I pull from parts of my experience to survive in my role in this industry and "the Black women in my network are the reminder that you've got this." Peer-to-peer relationships allow Black women to connect digitally through group chats, in networks like sororities and in sister circles which can be described as the social capital (Yosso, 2005).

This is also true in more formal relationships and networks such as mentorship. Oikelome (2017) describes the role of mentor as "essential in providing encouragement, advice, insight, guidance, and, in some instances, sponsorship" as a critical component to navigating leadership (p. 34). This is relevant to each woman's experience as many of them represent the first Black woman in their role and/or the only Black woman in senior-level leadership which positions them to benefit from the guidance of others. Participant 7 recognized the need for mentorship and how she "intentionally looked for mentors who were older African American women" that could support her in her role but also in navigating her career. This intentional engagement of people across teams and their organization is a necessary practice critical to how Black women navigate their organizations.

Leadership Behaviors

The study of leadership theory has been influenced by an integration of gender and race as factors that impact leadership practice and effectiveness, building upon the theory and praxis to improve the understanding of leadership behaviors (Newman, 2021). The inclusion of gendered, racialized and cultural practices impacting leadership diversifies the perception of leadership and how it can be defined. In the crooked room, Black women leaders attempt to stand upright forcing them to adopt behaviors and practices that contribute to productivity and effectiveness. For Black women leaders, the practice of leadership is strategic and process oriented (Bonaparte, 2016; Davis, 2012; Santamaria, 2014). Efforts to be effective are made successful by the strategic actions taken to complete tasks, lead teams and meet role expectations. These senior-level Black women leaders described their ability to make sense of information by "listening, analyzing and communicating needs" (Participant 14) and "with fair processes" (Participant 3) connecting those ideas to strategy in order to "to foster trust,

cooperation and collaboration" (Participant 12) when implementing plans for success. collaboratively implement plans for success. Participant 6 stated that "process informs strategy, tactics and creates clear deliverables for measurable success." This evidence is described in the subthemes; strategy and faith both representing the calculated measures Black women take as leaders in a space.

Strategy. Each participant identified strategic thinking, action and engagement as necessary skills used in their practice. In dialogue with the leaders, they describe how strategic thinking and action are connected to making decisions that "get the right people in the right places" (Participants 2) and is strategically connected to organizational and people management even if it requires "a softer approach" (Participant 10). Participant 5 reiterates that these "skills can function with other soft skills" supporting the idea that Black women's strategy is both calculated and complex. More specifically, participants described their engagement with their white women counterparts. It is a place that requires a certain level of self-awareness, "emotional control" (Participant 7), and is often harder to navigate because of the uncertainty of responses that may follow.

Participant 4 described her experience as follows:

> It's like I'm doing this matrix like around feelings, although nothing I am saying is implicit. I have to know what I can and can't do. The positional power that [white] women hold forces me to bring 30+ years of navigating white spaces as a Black person. Some of that comes from stepping on a landmine or some shit, and it's taxing because I can't see anything because of her feelings. When I think about strategy, I think about employing multiple practices at one time and doing so to survive every day.

Taking the cautionary approach to engaging with colleagues has a direct impact on how these leaders have to be strategic in making decisions and considering how to move the work forward. Participant 9 mentions that “there is more than one way to skin a cat” and when looking for a solution and she focuses on seeing multiple ways to finding effective answers to workplace challenges.

Although the same permission to have a different approach to the work is not often extended to her, it informs how she builds relationships and uses this as a way to make decisions in collaboration with others. Participant 9 stated “we have to be very careful, because we can’t just say anything.” Similarly, Participant 2 called this strategy “style flexing” and said this was necessary in navigating organizations. Strategic skills exist because the leaders are aware of the power and race dynamic and must consider not only how to engage others but the roles and positionality they take with other colleagues in relation to the work. For instance, Participants 11, 12 and 2 were specific in identifying the ways they show up as a connector or bridge between colleagues or the organization and the community. Participant 11 described her “inclusive and facilitated” efforts to include all team members while Participant 12 “leads by example" in showing her team ways to connect with others. Their ability to connect multiple audiences is a result of leveraging key strategic skills such as “active listening” (Participant 14) and showing empathy in their practice which yields strong relationships with others. Participant 3 suggested that an “initial part of the work is also restorative” in that she shows fairness in process and opportunity as way to gain support with making decisions.

Participant 1 stated:

> I am always hyperaware of my communication. If it’s a confrontational situation or a corrective situation, how you communicate—trying to be empathetic but also trying to

> make sure that you are addressing the situation. This makes management of staff really hard because you are attempting to circumvent any biases.

The dialogue continued as participants made connections between thinking, action and engagement and provided examples of when this happened. Further discussions on strategic action taken in Participant 10's organization led to a discussion on how Black women's presence, especially as a leader, takes up space. Participant 10 shared the following anecdote about her leadership presence:

> Early in my career it would feel like a burden to always have to be on and have to have everything right in place. I got to a comfort level where I saw my approach as less of a burden and more as a gift. It [this new comfort level] was an opportunity to reach and mentor others when they are struggling in their roles. I am able to help someone else in this position.

As the idea of what strategy looks like and how it works in each organization and company began to unfold, the leaders began to discuss how balancing their leadership presence was a part of navigating structures and social dynamics of the workplace.

Participant 5 recalls the following experience:

> As a person of color, you are always leading within a system. You learn to practice tempered radicalism as way to take up space but doing so with some high degree of temperance. I am constantly taking a step back and saying alright, how does my gender serve me? How does my Blackness serve me? How do all the aspects of cultural capital serve me? It's like an art. This helps you get what you want for your kids, for your community. This is not about suppressing anger or the realities of racism but it's how I use it to my advantage. Just being strategic in your Blackness.

In my notes, I wrote down, ‘strategic blackness’ as an idea to think about what that looks like in our practice.

Participant 4 stated:

> I think as a Black woman I feel the constant pressure to present perfectly and put my best foot forward which is stressful and I am learning to manage it but it does mean that I have a pretty strong work performance.

These examples described how Black women leverage parts of their identity to navigate certain spaces. Throughout the analysis, many of the stories about how these women worked continued to build the case for their strategic organizational navigation.

Faith. This strategic work is impacted by an immaterial factor of faith. Faith was not initially identified in the questionnaire but ideas about their moral values and spiritual direction were raised during the focus groups. During the analysis of the data collected via the questionnaire I noted faith as a possible practice amongst Black women and wanted to understand more about the role it had in their leadership. I introduced faith to the conversation and in each focus group, participants overwhelmingly added a head nod or their eyes got big as they prepared to share how faith played a role in their practice. In the analysis, every participant throughout the focus groups mentioned the role of a spiritual force or moral guidance as a part a of their practice. Some participants who do not identify as Christian, articulated how the connection to the universe and those energies impacted their practice. Five of the 15 participants used language to describe themselves like “as a Christ-conscious leader,” “as a woman of faith,” “as someone who believes in a divine power.” These women stressed that as a leader they must know a “who and whose you are” and act accordingly by “practicing what you preach”. This raised a point to further discuss the role of a spiritual guidance in their practice, a concept that

has been explored by others. Sakho-Lewis (2017) writes about the deep ancestral roots and spirits connected to Black women's lived experience. Black scholars and Black mommas often speak of a moral compass, a guiding, living universal energy that provides instruction and focus.

Participants in each focus group thought deeply about the key words from the visual (Figure 6) explaining their collective leadership experience and about their individual skills and practices in relation to the socio-cultural capitals that Yosso (2005) described. In another focus group, Participant 2 shared how her experience with family and community raised an idea around a "faith capital for Black women that does not get the coverage" it deserves. She referenced her mom and grandmothers who really were grounded in their faith practice.

Five of the participants, all from different industries named faith as a critical leadership quality that influenced how they engaged people and how faith is used as a tool when making decisions and providing direction. Participant 2 described in her focus group what it was like growing up during the Jim Crow era and what it felt like "waking up every day as a Black woman and finding a way to stand with hope and not be destroyed by labels." Participant 9 described faith as the source of "fullness that doesn't come from anybody at work, they can't give it to me, and they can't take it away from me. When I come in with a smile, I know I am ready to work and I know that I've connected to the source." Many of the participants described the way they harness or connect to their faith as a skill used to connect their cultural identities to their practice. Similarly, Participant 15 offered her personal anecdote that her "religious beliefs provide a moral compass for how I lead and react in situations." In so many ways, participants were able to relate to faith as a practice because, as Participant 5 stated, "Oh, it's a thing."

During the conversation, I invited participants to provide context for the ways they used faith and how it impacts their leadership practices.

Participant 13 shares the following:

> I don't think faith initially came up as a skill because its automatic. It is just what we do. We don't have to say that we believe in God [or a universal power] or that we pray before we went into a meeting. Its automatic. Especially for me if I know I am going to have a tough day or going into a meeting that has a lot of naysayers in there, I say an additional prayer so I can be covered a little bit more.

Her response provided some context for why faith was so important to the conversation and is a part of their leadership, yet not identified when asked to list their skills and practices. In other focus groups, participants connected this faith practice to their purpose, thus confirming their role as a leader. During the conversation, faith transferred as not just guidance but a source of confidence for leaders who face adversity in so many ways.

Participant 10 offered an alternative perspective:

> We often talk about faith as our strength and not about it as our hope. Because our ancestors went through so much, faith was there as the thing that held the glue together. We are in such a different space now, not that we don't need it for our strength but that same God that gave it to us for hope and to be anchor, gave it to us so we could fly.

Naturally, the response was a few amens, head nods and fingers pointing in full agreement. It was that moment that that group really started to think about what faith looked like in practice.

Participant 9 added to that:

> Because I know the responsibility that I have as an employee, the responsibilities that I have as a strategic thinker and the things that make up my leadership, I have to be full. That means there is nothing that you can do—not your microaggression, you ignoring my suggestions- it can't penetrate because of my faith- I am grounded.

In these discussions, it was clear that there was something more about the role of a spiritual force that each participant spoke to as a guide or a universal energy that helped to lead and navigate their organizations. In Figure 7, I started to create a list of the skills and practices that were described and heavily noted in the analysis.

Figure 7

Leadership Skills and Practices Visual 2

As a part of my memo notes, I used this list to build on as I collected more data from research question 2.

Research Question 2: Race, Gender and Culture

The second research question asks about the influence of race, gender and culture on senior-level cross-sector Black women's leadership skills and practice. This question was focused on the women's individual and shared experiences. Initial responses in the leadership questionnaire shared the challenge with separating these three identities. Respondents described specifically how race and gender are inextricably linked making it hard to assign experiences to one or the other. In the questionnaire, the open-ended questions provided an opportunity for each

respondent to describe how these identities influenced their leadership skills and practice. During focus group one, each participant was able to share more about the impact of these identities and share examples of how they were connected.

As the researcher, I reflected on my memos in this moment because I share some of the same identities with the participants I too, had some challenging and some successful experiences that were influenced by these three factors. I used my written and vlog memos to process what the participants shared and thoughtfully ruminated on their experiences, the stories they shared and how they might have been different based off of each person's lived experience. An excerpt from my memo read:

> I imagine that this is the heavy thinking of many Black feminist scholars who seek to see Black women as individuals and as a collective. During the focus groups, I constantly stopped to pause and actively listened as to not make assumptions and intentionally choose asset-based language when describing their practice.

In an attempt to explore each identity, I isolated each in a question asking that each woman describe her leadership in response to the influence of that identity factor. Knowing that some would naturally connect gender, race, and culture, I then followed up by stacking the questions to give an opportunity to provide a broad explanation.

Black

Many scholars write about what it means to be Black in America. (Coates, 2015) writes about how 250 years of Black history was in chains and still many generations who were not physically in chains are still experiencing the impact. Coates' (2015) work is forecasted by Feagin's (2010) idea of the WRF that exists as the structures creating this confined environment.

Understanding what it means to have Black skin, a Black body, to present as Black is critical in interrogating the racialized experiences of the participants.

The initial responses in the survey to this question were seemingly filled with needing to overextend and overreach in order to present as being well-prepared as leaders. Each participant described how cognizant they were about their race.

Participant 6 stated:

> I am aware of racial norms and inequities of the world and how they impact opportunity for disenfranchised communities. Being Black had everything to do with how they lead with excellence, and with a focus on others.

Race for these women had always created a challenge for them in workspaces, especially those that were predominately white. Participant 2 described how "being Black made her hyperaware" of how she engaged and communicated with others. Participant 13's work is centered around children; she said, "their well-being is far more important than the folks who have issues with taking orders from a Black woman." Their responses were connected to others who talked about navigating racial stereotypes and doing so by overcompensating in their practice and leaving no room for error. Participant 14 described "over analyzing decisions because of the perceptions that exist based on race." Participant 15 said she was "more precise and firmer with decisions" as well. This illustrated how Black women understand how the world sees them and how they "anticipate the barriers and stereotypes" (Participants 1 and 2) which inform how they show up as leaders. Neither of these women want to "appear as angry or combative" (Participant 7). As leaders, Participants 14 and 15 noted how they have to be more precise, and they deeply analyzed decisions to combat any perceptions about their abilities because of their race. The perceptions informed how they engage with other leaders as they are careful not to appear as

angry or combative and this is done by anticipating the barriers that might come up (Participants 1, 2 and 7).

When asked about the influence of race, many of the participants described a hypervisibility in the workplace, their role in critically and empathetically considering the experiences of others (clients, students, community), and strategic navigation in communication practices. There were notes about feeling the need to be over-prepared and how that felt like a great deal of pressure. There were a lot of negative responses to what it means to be Black. Among those responses two participants did provide some more positive influences of their race. Participant 4 described that being a Black woman at her job gave her an "increased level of trust" specifically because she works in a racially and ethnically diverse environment. Participant 12 associated her "skill development to her race which pushes her to excel." These additional narratives help to build on their skills and practices as Black women.

Black and Woman

Crenshaw's (1989) work on intersectionality calls for an exploration of humanity beyond race or gender. Her work posed that without intersectionality one cannot sufficiently understand the experience of Black women. To critically engage Black women leaders, I invited participants to share how gender and in many cases gender and race impact their leadership. Participants identified the ways being a woman "influenced their resiliency," "growth mentality," and their "unapologetic approach to leading others" (Participants 4, 12, 9). Other participants suggested that gender influenced their soft skills and approach to people engagement. Soft skills "are essential for any leader to be successful," said Participant 2 and despite sometimes "being underestimated" (Participant 8) they have proved to be necessary "from one generation of leaders to the next" (Participant 7).

As Black women are often positioned in the margins of society, these Black women found creative ways to use that experience as integral to their leadership practice. Participant 15 named the marginality of her gendered and racialized experience by stating "this has impact on my leadership because I am always thinking about everyone who might be left out." Her approach holds her accountable to inviting more voices in the space. She and three others in the group noted that "as Black women, we are always thinking about the other." Some of the education and non-profit leaders identified this as servant leadership, a critical people management practice. In another group, Participant 11 related her gendered and race experience to the risks it takes to show up for others and doing so out of necessity. There was a moment in history that women had few rights, but Black women were experiencing this deeply even more during segregation.

Participant 11 recalled the following:

> I was young and had to use the restroom in this rural area and we stopped at a store. At the time there was a colored and a white restroom. Well, the restroom for Black folks was broken and my mom took me into the white bathroom anyway. I am just thinking about that risk she took to make sure I could use the bathroom. At the time, I remembering just wanting to know why that was the case.

Her story really charged the group to think about risk and inquiry as a way to catalyze change in their roles. Her mom took a risk that could have resulted in tragedy and as a youth she wanted to understand more about the systemic barriers and in her reflection, she learned something about how this experience influenced her to take charge as a woman and take risk for others.

Participant 12 described the experience of being a Black woman and having to be resilient because in "all the settings she negotiates her place and space." She suggested that constantly

navigating the barriers in professional spaces and social situations requires skill. This experience was enlightening as it highlighted the race and gender influences the leadership compassion and advocacy when working others and promotes critical questioning to inform their perspective.

Black, Woman, and Cultured

Culture is defined as the beliefs, values, behaviors, language, traditions, habits, and regional customs. As the third identifying facto, I engaged the women by asking them to describe the influence of race, gender and culture. Throughout the analysis culture had implications for how the leaders were able to think about big picture goals and vision and their ability to understand multiple perspectives. Participants expressed how living in multiple regions and for participants 2, 10 and 15 working in different environments informed how they understand teams and people. Participant 13 was able to make the connection between individual culture differences and how they interact with company or sector cultures which informed how she "used multiple lenses to develop an inclusive team culture."

The Black women across all industries, discussed culture from the perspective of their families. For the women who had families who were not US Born, there was a layer of familial culture and tradition that would speak to their strategic navigation in the workplace as it relates to people engagement, language and speech. Participant 8 stated, "the influence of culture on my leadership, skills and practice allows me to bring nuance to the table and be open about it being my differentiator." For many of them, the intersectionality of race, gender and culture expanded their thinking about how to lead. Participant 10 explicitly stated, "because my culture is not one thing, but many things it allows me to consider a variety of possibilities in leadership." This broad idea of possibility is influenced by an expansive understanding of what culture is and how it is tethered to leadership practices. Cultural influences in leadership for each of the women

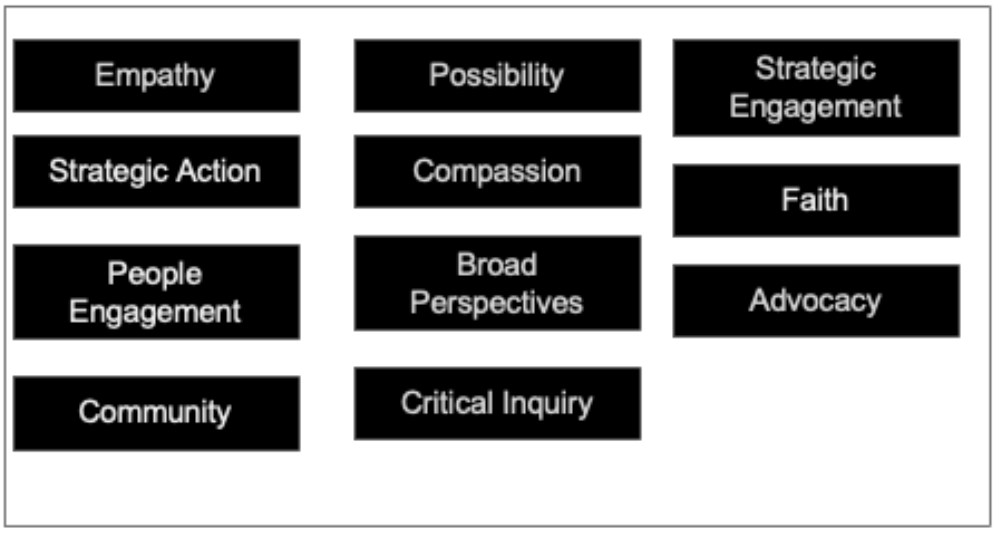
raised ideas about their multiple identities and connected them to how they engage teams and make decisions. Participants 5 and 6 described how cultural diversity "allows for innovation when all backgrounds and experiences have a voice," and "learning that for the team it allows them to lead more effectively." Culture is so complex and some of the participants identified multiple cultural influences. For instance, "being family oriented as a mom" or "being raised in rural areas in the south" and "using colloquialisms" shows up in their practice (Participants, 3, 9 and 12). Participant 2 expressed this eloquently saying,

> We are all products of our environments. We are born with the DNA that shape how we engage the world, but family is the primary source of influence thereafter. My Creole culture promotes giving, caring for others, treating people fairly and with kindness. My deep southern, Creole roots are about family and these dynamics contribute to how I engage as a leader for sure. I am very aware of making people feel good and welcomed. I am intentional about inclusion. My faith is also a big part of my culture and shows up in every facet of my life. As a leader because of this belief, I believe that we should be focused on helping others. That translates into my strong desire to unleash the greatest potential in every person that I meet.

Participant 1 noted that "culture impacts everything I do but it's difficult to parse it out" and this is true for many of the identities that these women hold. The data from the leadership questionnaire and in the focus groups, was used to identify additional skills that were elevated as result of the influence of race, gender, and culture. In Figure 8 I added to the list of skills and practices that corroborated the notion that race, gender and culture impacted Black women's leadership skills and practice.

Figure 8

Leadership Skills and Practices Visual 2 Updated



The skills and practices from Figure 8 are evidence that indicated that the impact of race, gender and culture. In view of all the data discussed, one may suppose that experiences of these cross-sector leaders and examples of skills leveraged to navigate their professional spaces had other implications for their leadership presence.

At What Cost?

After focus group one and throughout the discussion in focus group 2, participants were uncompromising in charging me, as the researcher, to not only expose these skills as inherent to Black women's practices but to also the hard truths about how these women are able to lead as they do. The reality is that Black women cannot do it all, but their attempt to do all that they can comes at a cost. It is critical to acknowledge what Black women bring and the context for which their leadership skills and practices are developed.

This was exactly what Participant 6 framed by saying:

> The skills that were identified in the study are incredibly empowering, like an armor that was put on with Black girlhood. The imbalance of all of that is what has us at the state of being burnt out. Other leaders who are not Black women don't show up with that same level of the entire world on their shoulders. It's like 'I'm at work right, this is not the world.' Whereas for us, we are at work as if we are the entire community we grew up in, the entire high school we went to, the entire next generation of family. I hope that there is some context. My leadership is not just about me, which is why all the strength exists but it's also heavy.

Heavy. In response, the women in her group were silent, realizing that her commentary alleviated some of the pressure they felt. After a brief moment of silence, two participants unmuted to say "Yes, exactly!" I wrestled with my knowledge of the effects of systems of whiteness, male dominated spaces, and attempted to balance that with the realities of Black women's experience in the crooked room. Doing so uncovered the complexity of Black women's leadership that has been confined by the perceptions that others have about their race, gender and culture.

Organizational Containment

Dr. Risha Berry (2014) postulated that the organizational containment theory described the systemic barriers that are encountered when actively pursuing resources critical to effectiveness and advancement. The study focused on codifying the ways the senior-level Black women leaders described their leadership and by identifying key practices and skills that are resultantly impacted by their racialized, gendered and cultural lived experiences. The idea that organizational containment as a phenomenon, related to Black women's professional experiences has prohibited career mobility for Black women. This is evident in the low percentage of senior

administrators and executive level Black women leaders across industries. The participants were able to identify critical incidents that have paused their progress at different stages in their career. Participant 12 stated:

> Throughout my career I thought I was being my excellent self and I didn't see a lot of stuff. But when you get the doctorate and you are in a male environment and across the world, then you start to meet resistance.

This participant continued to share how her gender caused tension in the academy, and she was forced to learn new ways to navigate that environment. Participant 2 opened up in conversation to say that as a Black woman there are things, we experience that are hard to explain. She shared by stating "there is something we do with pain." Other participants nodded their head and placed their hand on their hearts as to say that they could really empathize with what she was saying. She continued by sharing how Black women "learn to swallow the tears" of all the pain, adversity and microaggressions they experience. Within the context of understanding how gender and sometimes culture creates barriers, Participant 9 raised how "the common trope of being angry Black women make relationships at work tense." She described how being framed as such even when you are not angry, "it requires courage to call it out but that comes with a lot of emotional labor." Participant 4 described that work as "being cultural educators" which forces Black women to engage even when we are harmed and that has implications for Black women taking care of themselves. In this instance, Participant 4 described this cycle of strategic engagement, harm, trauma, resilience, and code switching that "ultimately leaves Black women far from themselves which negatively impacts their mental and physical wellness."

Participants in each focus group shared how Black women are "challenged by imposter syndrome" and strive to be all things to all people. In each discussion, participants talked

intimately about mental health and how it is negatively impacted by the hostility of their work environments, which are only perpetuating systems, inequities and bias.

Participant 2 stated:

> I do think the danger in all of this, we bankrupt ourselves as Black women. We give and give and give and one day we wake up and don't have anything. So, we have to be careful as we think about all this great attributes. The downside is not overcoming cultural learning that cause us to be selfless. This is a warning that comes from Black women, specifically because you know we can't turn it off.

The Watson and Hunter (2016) study focused on the tensions with the strong Black women schema. The findings suggested that adopting this self-perception of being able to do it all and being strong mentally yielded positive self-efficacy but had negative impacts on selfcare. The impact on self-care sometimes yields coping habits that include, suppressing emotions, unhealthy eating, and shopping and excessive drinking (Watson & Hunter, 2016) Participant 5 shared that her "experience as a leader was really lonely." Although her job includes showing up and leading while forming relationships with colleagues, there are still points where she realized that the strong Black woman image is sometimes a performative practice to keep the work moving. Three other participants in the group agreed that the image of being a "strong Black women," put together, "having all the right pieces" was difficult when in reality there were "voids in personal relationships" and that as leaders they were struggling. The idea of companionship came up and it what it takes to be all things, like brave and resilient, as a leader while also needing to find the balance to engage in partnership.

Perry et al. (2013) conducted a study to assess the effects of racial and gender discrimination on health and wellbeing of black women. The findings suggested that in fact,

racism and sexism have psychological and physiological effects leading to depression, substance abuse, extreme fatigue and other diseases. Public health and critical race scholars are able to identify how marginalized groups are directly impacted by discrimination of their multiple identities. This has implications for these Black women leaders' ability to advance or be retained. In response, Black women have found ways to pivot and adapt in order to be successful in their careers. As a way to center Black women's humanity in this work, it is important to name the struggle with imposter syndrome, negative stereotyping and being subjected to the criticism of their counterparts. It is in these experiences and in those lessons taught by their elders that these Black women were able to adopt and develop necessary skills to move forward. In learning about the extreme measures taken to survive these leadership spaces, their stories and narratives elevated key pieces to their practice.

Chapter 6: We are magical, but we are not mythical.

Research question three builds on the idea that race, gender and culture influence leadership skills and practice. To identify, define and operationalize the skills and practices, I asked participants explicitly what skills were elevated as a result of their racialized, gendered and cultural experiences. After focus group one, I revisited old memos and created new vlogs to start to map out the relevant skills and practices. After pages of circles and squares, connecting lines and shaded figures, I found it easier to process how these skills were related to their experience. The data collected from the first two research questions provided a historical and institutional understanding for how Black women operate as leaders. Research question three extended those ideas by providing the language to substantiate the leadership skills and practices.

In pop culture, we often hear the phrase "Black Girl Magic." It is a proclamation of beauty, talent, skills and pride for Black women. This has become a highlight to our existence and in some ways becomes a validation for and affirmation of all the ways Black women show up. Many of the participants have adopted this mantra as a positive affirmation and in some ways confirmation for the things that they can and will accomplish. An unpopular viewpoint was raised suggesting the world sees that magic as opportune or impalpable. "Black Girl Magic" has been misread as a superpower. The data analysis from the research questions, put into context the magnitude of Black women's racialized, gendered and cultural experiences and presented their skills and practices as grounded in experience, calculated, and deliberate. This was exemplified in the work undertaken by Black women within systems and institutions riddled with racism, sexism, and inequities that are barriers to access and career mobility.

Participant 4 responded to this by saying:

> I don't like how people have co-opted Black Girl Magic. They used it in reference to Stacy Abrams and a network of other Black women. No! There were decades of work to lay the groundwork. it looks like it happened miraculously overnight, but it was years in the making – hours of underpaid (if even paid at all) work. Sometimes [Black Girl Magic] can really undermine the labor behind our contributions and efforts.

Her thoughts were not uncommon as other participants wanted to make it clear that what you see in their leadership is intentional and strategic. Throughout the study, it was difficult to identify a definitive skill or practice, however that does not take away from artfulness of their leadership. Participant 9 eloquently stated:

> Yes, we are magical but they think we're mythical. They look at us and say what in the world!? How does she do what she does and is still smiling? They can't wrap their minds around it.

This point was underscored by the charge to me from participants to use this study to not only talk about the skills and practice but also to help the public to understand the magnitude of it all. They wanted readers to know that Black women aren't serendipitously showing up and performing, but that this is a result of histories of adversity, challenges and resistance. Notwithstanding those experiences, Black women leaders developed the skills to persist and be resilient and its now a part of their leadership craft. The varying interpretations of Black Girl Magic supported research question three which explores the skills and practices elevated as result of the influence of race, gender, and culture. As participants shared narratives and personal anecdotes, they surfaced key skills and practices relevant to their role as leaders.

Race, Gender and Culture: Skills and Practice

As an extension of the responses in the questionnaire, I used the focus groups to discuss what skills were elevated as Black women leaders. The findings confirm the association between race, gender and culture as influential factors on their leadership. Figure 8 guided my analysis in identifying the skills and practices that were discussed. The experiences of these senior-level cross-sector Black women leaders were complex and interconnected. The process of analyzing what the women experienced and how it was connected to their skills and practice took a multidimensional approach. As an entry point to discuss the elevated skills and practices, I asked participants to identify songs that represented celebration, motivation, or calming for them as leaders. The women started to connect their "theme songs" to their practice. After this icebreaker, the women were able to provide additional context and were able to name the skills and practices that were most relevant. The conversations included the following commentary:

Participant 5 shared:

> I vacillate somewhere between like Beyonce and like Meg the Stallion on any given day, particularly when I think about having to be strategic. When I am going into a board meeting, I listen to very direct Black women rapping at me about how great I am and how much of a boss. Or if I am trying to hold space for someone, I lean heavily on my southern Christian Baptist roots.

Participant 14 shared:

> My theme song was Kurt Carr's Encourage Yourself. It speaks to the heart, especially when you got things going around and not everyone has your best interest in mind. You got to just encourage yourself and keep going. This speaks to the terminology around agility and resilience.

The music conversation was exciting as it prompted the women to think through the words used to describe their skills and provide ways to define them by their experiences. The following quotations represent examples of how the participants were able to more concretely name the skills and practices prompted by the icebreaker.

Participant 1 stated:

> Communication is the one area that I am super aware of-- in-person, via zoom or email. This communication about the delivery, particularly if the situation is challenging, because you don't want to be seen as angry. It's that and for example if it's in an email, wanted to make sure what I say is clear. Sometimes I read the email too many times but wanted to be sure I am clear.

Participant 2 shared:

> What I learned when working with other women is that because we are Black women we have been subjected to labels, subjected to the inequities and as result we are more creative, resilient, innovative and we communicate with more care and empathy.

Participant 12 shared:

> Black folks just always be reading each other. We read the room. Because of who we are and what we have endured, we had to be quick studies. It was then that I began to understand this through spirituality—discernment.

Related to participant 12's focus was commentary from Participant 4 who said, "colloquially for Black folks it's called the site – or the vision." She described the vison setting or the ability to foresee things in the work. This translates to seeing trends or being able to forecast during strategy discussions. Throughout the focus groups, each woman shared personal anecdotes but throughout the analysis the stories started to take shape as critical skills and practices.

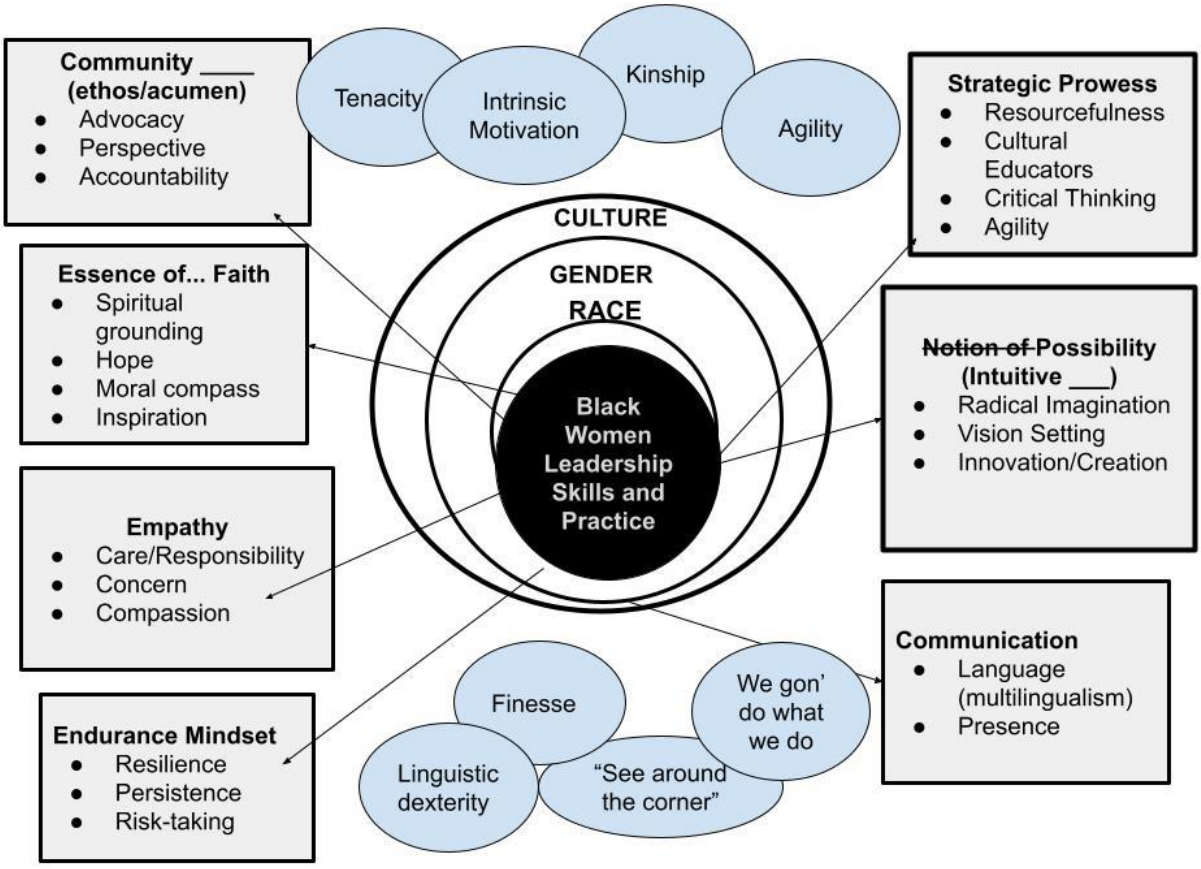
Participants 3, 7 and 15 described instances where they described Black women's practice as "agility." This bending, moving and adjusting is required, thus "making Black women able to move and create in various spaces." The participants started see the value add of their contributions and reframed their language used to describe their leadership. By incorporating music as a point of reference and allowing for them share their stories of leadership and practice, I was able to better synthesize the skills most salient to their leadership.

What are the skills?

During the analysis process before focus group 1, I used a visual (Figure 6, page 46) that highlighted the elevated skills and practices that were common in the data. These skills and practices were not defined but did encompass examples and language from the participant focus groups. This visual was used to spark their thinking and processing of the words we had used that I had thought deeply about. After focus group 1, I was able to build on their responses by adding supporting details, ideas about skills and practices and was able to provide explanations for where the skills were referenced in the study. Figure 9 is the visual I used before each session during the second focus group.

Figure 9.

Leadership Skills and Practices



This graphic was put together with notes from the memos, analysis from multiple rounds of coding, and by using music as a tool to process all of the data. Figure 9 evolved throughout all of the focus group 2 meetings, and this is evident as the words being used changed and some were added during the discussions. The center of the graphic reiterates that this study is focused on the leadership skills and practices of Black women. To remind participants about the key intersecting factors, they are displayed in an ecological model as they interact with each other and impact individual experiences. The boxes represent the multiple attempts at identifying key skills and practices and related behaviors. The bulleted points in each box represent the associated behaviors for each skill and practice. Lastly, this graphic includes bubbles which were words

gathered in the analysis that I thought would spark their thinking. It was a conversation starter during the focus groups and reminded the women of some of the language previously used throughout the two phases.

The Discussion

During each of the four focus groups in round two, participants opened their discussion with any point from the graphic This discussion included processing word definitions, perceptions of what word pairing would mean, calling for specific behaviors to be identified and also adding skills and practices that were not previously named. The following anecdotes expound upon the collective reasoning of the identified skills and practices. The commentary provided context for how participants engaged with the definitions of the skills and practices and shared ideas about how they fit into the framework.

Endurance Mindset. Initially there were six boxes not including endurance mindset and throughout the focus groups, it became evident that this was a skill that needed to be included. To add, Participant 9 shared that "courage is a part of endurance" and seeing that represented was key to completing the identified practices. Participant 7 stated "education mindset took me to the lyrics of the Spellman hymn" and the behaviors listed helped me to visualize the very essence of keeping going no matter what.

Community. Similarly, a discussion around words like ethos and acumen questioned the relevance and meaning of these words and whether or not they added value when paired with the word community. Feedback included "ethos sounds too academic" and "community should be connected to various types of networks." I understood community not as a general idea of an external facing group but as intentional people engagement that not only supports these women in their work but represents who they are and why they do the work.

Strategic Prowess. In thinking about the strategic prowess frame, participants felt that this skill included agility. Participants thought that agility was something "Black women naturally" have as "they are always adapting to the various environments" that they enter even when it does not feel welcoming. The back and forth about the word choice made it clear that participants were thinking about how to describe these practices accurately.

Communication. One way to really understand how to navigate spaces was through communication. Participant 7 referenced communication as the "indirect evidence that is somewhat second nature" which described the ways Black women are "able to see and hear what is not said" in order to determine how to respond or engage. Participant 4 referenced the language as "a coded language that you are fluent in and nobody knows it." Communication was a skill that had to be defined because Black women practice it in so many ways.

Notion of Possibility. In reference to the word notion, used to describe the forward and innovative vision setting that Black women have there was some critique. Participant 1 explained that it was "something about that language that didn't feel complete or as bold as the other words." With this in mind, I shared the feedback in the following sessions, and participants agreed that as notion suggested a slight bit or a little and in actuality, the practice of vision setting and "seeing around the corner" was more strategic. Participant 12 described this as "radical imagination that was related to the innovative and creative parts of Black women's intuition."

Faith. The discourse around faith and spiritual grounding included the ways Black women use faith as a tool and personal protective practice. In some cases, participants were explicit in saying that I could use the word faith "if that's what the spirit leads you to do." The women discussed having it be inclusive of other ways of experiencing Faith like universal

energies and grounding. Participant 13 added hope as a related idea to faith and said it "keeps us grounded when making decisions when no one is watching."

Empathy. Empathy was a powerful conversation as many participants discussed how empathy was inherent to their practice and found that they were using this skill more since the start of the pandemic. Participants 5 and 13 connected as it related to empathy because they understood it as a "responsibility that we put on ourselves" that makes us "take care of each other."

To conclude this section, I suggest that the skills and practices of these Black women leaders were not trial and error, rather they were wisely developed within the context of their lived experiences. The data collected in the study suggested that these Black women leaders' practice is judiciously employed. Additional evidence presented in the data analysis was further analyzed, considering the feedback given during the final focus group. To build on this list of skills, I gave myself time to sit with their words, music and focused on designating the skills and practices influenced by their racialized, gendered and cultural experiences.

Chapter 7: A Grounded Framework

The findings from research questions further support the idea that race, gender and culture influence the skills and practices of senior-level cross-sector Black women leaders. The data collected seem to be consistent with other research which found that Black women leaders take a multifaceted approach to leadership within the confines of systems that were created to marginalize Black women (Bonaparte, 2016; Collins, 2000; Santamaria, 2014). Furthermore, when considering Harris-Perry's (2011) work with the Black women's politic in conjunction with Yosso's (2005) focus on community cultural wealth, the findings are grounded in lived experience offering a reframed narrative about Black women's leadership contributions. The Black women in the study are in different industries yet they all are serving in senior-level roles and were consistent in sharing their experiences and connecting those to practice. Their leadership narratives were aligned with the literature base and offered concrete evidence of the ways race, gender, and culture have influenced their leadership experience. Figure 10 is a visual of the connection between race, gender, culture and the Black women's leader's experience. A part of the study focused on the cross-sector experience of the women. Throughout the study, the data suggested the women had similar experiences as least when considering race, gender and culture. The sector and type of role did not present as a having a different experience. Race, gender and culture had the most influence on their practice. Although the women represented a diversity of cultures, they still expressed similar barriers to leadership, resistance as leaders, and employed similar leadership skills and behaviors.

Figure 10

A Grounded Framework

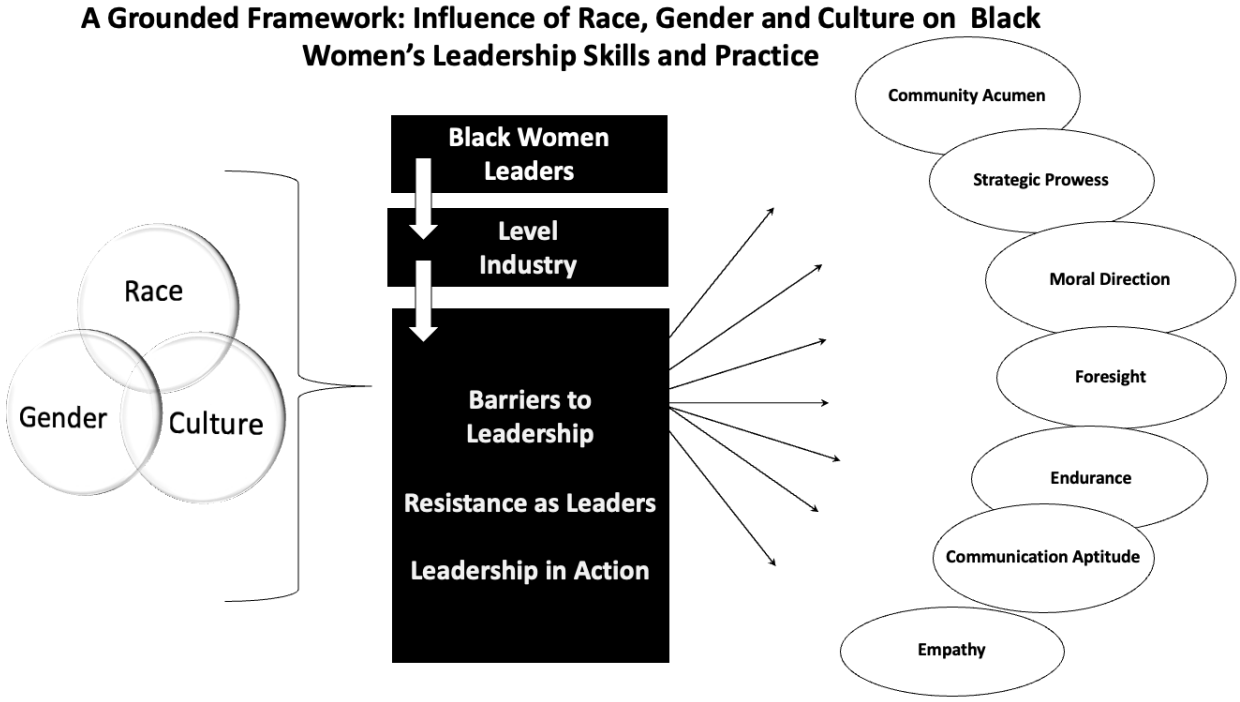


Figure 10 frames the components of the study but also guides the framework to understanding Black women's leadership skills and practices. This study is focused on the influence of race, gender, and culture on Black women's leadership skills and practice. More specifically it identifies how to connect Black women's intersectional identities to their leadership. This study focused on senior-level cross-sector women yet there were not significant themes that highlighted a difference in leadership experience across industry or level. They noted skills and practices were a result of their individual leadership experiences categorized by 1) Barriers to Leadership, 2) Resistance as Leaders, 3) Leadership in action which were influenced by race, gender and culture.

In Table 4 below, the skills, definitions, and related behaviors grounded in the study are listed. This list is not exhaustive of all the skills and practices of senior-level Black women leaders; however, they represent those most salient set of skills elevated from the study analysis.

Table 4

Leadership Skills and Practices Defined

Leadership Skills	Definition …grounded in the study	Related Practices and Behaviors
Community Acumen	A community-centered approach leveraging a collective mindset toward making judgements and decisions; intentional relationship building to serve others and also in service to self; identifying personal needs	• Advocacy • Multiple Perspectives • Accountability • Network/Mentorship • Self-awareness
Strategic Prowess	Ability to navigate spaces with a plan of action that considers people, environment, and opportunity; making informed decisions that weigh all outcomes; acknowledging how intersectional identities inform perception, thus leveraging one's ability to pivot	• Resourcefulness • Cultural Educators • Critical Thinking • Agility
Moral Direction	Guidance and aspiration that connects passion to purpose; influence on servant leadership; critical to people engagement, navigation and decision making	• Faith • Spiritual grounding • Guiding Energy • Inspiration • Hope
Foresight	Ability to "see around the corner"- identify trends, forecasting and to prepare for/build, create, share possibilities	• Radical Imagination • Vision Setting • Innovation/Creativity • Intuition
Endurance	An attitude of persistence and "press" toward a goal; making choices that support an action-orientation to continue despite the environment; identifying necessary tools and resources to continue	• Resilience • Persistence • Risk-taking • Self-care

Leadership Skills	Definition …grounded in the study	Related Practices and Behaviors
Communication Aptitude	A discerning practice of reading the room and leveraging verbal and nonverbal actions, multiple dialects and linguistic dexterity to show up and engage across lines of difference	• Language (multilingualism) • Non-verbal communication • Colloquial speech
Empathy	The practice of intentional care for others with attention to and with responsibility of their well-being.	• Care/Responsibility • Concern • Compassion

Strong evidence of the skills and practices were surmised through the thorough analysis of each phase of the study. A common view amongst the women was that these skills are used in many ways to navigate their organizations, meet role expectations, and help with sustaining their existence in their role. In the final member check, participants were presented with a version of Figure 10 and with the list of skills and practices in Table 4. Respondents were in agreement with the outcomes of the framework suggesting that the framework represented their practice. Feedback surfaced about word choices and clarification of the definitions and practices. These views surfaced with some additional ideas about word choice and clarification of the definitions and practice. That information was reviewed, and the framework and skills and practices were updated accordingly as presented in this chapter.

The skills and practices listed are aligned to the themes of the literature review and some additional skills were identifies. The definitions of the practices were grounded in the experiences of the leaders and analyzed throughout data collection. Overall, the findings of this study indicate that the influence of race, gender, and culture does impact Black women's senior-leadership skills and practice. Closely analyzing the how these skills were developed and shaped by the oppressive systems and institutions. These skills do not represent above and beyond achievement but are deeply rooted in survival mechanisms necessary to create space for

themselves as leaders and to sustain in their positions. This research does not seek to applaud Black women for operating in oppressive systems, rather it criticizes our intellection of their leadership skills and practice. This research makes aware the conditions by which Black women leaders have developed their leadership and adapted skills and practices to serve them and their work. In addition to uncovering the complexity of their practice, this research affirms Black women's value add to their organizations and companies and invites Black women leaders to reframe the narrative about their leadership skills and practice.

Chapter 8: Reframe the Narrative

In the early stages of my research, I initially considered research questions that evoked an extremely emotional and psychological response to the significance of this research. I knew that the questions I asked these women were relevant to my own future career goals and in many ways this study would develop an understanding of my own leadership. I constantly checked my thinking as a way to remind myself that this was about centering Black women's leadership experience. At times, that was difficult to do, because by default society prescribes to the ways of whiteness and maleness. I struggled with the research questions as they initially deferred to this idea around being proximate to whiteness. It took a lot of processing and reimagining what it means to center Black women's experience and to do so starting from a place of power and authority, not from a deficit point of view. I was adamant about not spending my thinking and writing on all of the broken institutions that have failed Black women for so long. This research does acknowledge how those systems create hostile environments but raises its focus to the leadership skills and practice as the greater outcome. From the findings in the previous chapter, the list of skills and practices affirm Black women's professional contributions. This chapter discusses the implications of this study and future of this research.

What should we call it?

In thinking about the roles and responsibilities of leaders, there are questions that seek to understand behaviors or competencies. In my personal memos, I started to map out possible interview questions (Table 5) that are used when seeking to understand more about someone's leadership practice and competencies. In Table 5, column 2, there is a second list of questions that I developed or that I have learned about in conversations with other Black women. The

questions in column 2 are those that are subconsciously developing in Black women's minds, yet they don't always get answered. The challenge is to grapple with the questions in column 1 while authentically responding with a reframed narrative about Black women's skills and practices.

Table 5

What Should I Call It?

Potential Interview Questions	Questions to myself: What should I call it?!
Do you have questions about the expectations from your manager?	*What do we call it when Black women have been the most neglected?*
How do you prepare for implementing a new organizational strategy?	*What do we call it when we are really tired yet we are still alert?*
How do you manage conflict?	*What do we call it when we hold back our tears because there is no way you can cry at work?*
Are you a team player?	*What do we call it when all we think about is everyone else but ourselves?*
What do you call it when you solve a really big problem?	*What do you call it when you solve a really big problem and don't get the credit for it?*

For Black women, the first list of questions is conflated with the second list of questions about how to prepare to navigate the workplace environment. Those typical interview questions get answers, while the others are answered with experience or once an incident occurs. Covertly, Black women find themselves responding to all of the questions at the same time. Throughout the study, the women struggled with naming their skills and practices. It was difficult to name those skills and concretely define those skills knowing that often these skills and practices are tools they use in leadership but are not always explicitly announced.

This research extends the opportunity for Black women to confidently name the leadership skills and practices that add value to their work. In circumstances where these skills are necessary and relevant to the work, Black women should be able to own this and articulate

how it is advantageous to their practice. Reclaiming these skills knowing, that they were developed in adverse conditions and often out of necessity won't feel natural. Saying out loud, that Black women's community acumen, strategic prowess and communication aptitude exists because of sexism and racism won't be easy. It will likely have Black women taking pause in recollection of how those skills were developed. Despite this moment of hesitation, I will argue that now is the time for Black women to reimage their place and space as leaders. Black women have what it takes and despite the conditions by which they develop their leadership, their leadership skills and practices are critical to their work.

Study Implications

The findings of this research have implications for policy, practice and personally for Black women. These findings could inform organizational and company practices related to recruitment, retention, advancement, culture and compensation. Similarly, the implications for the skills that were identified and defined supports the narratives and stories about Black women's leadership skills and practices and their value add to their workplace.

Policy

In the current political state, race and gender are significant areas of concern and with a particular focus on policy. The politics of Black womanhood has always been at the center of policy decisions and outcomes and this research has implications for how to advance those efforts. Black women are often subjected to political control, creating barriers or limits to opportunities which can be mitigated with a deeper understanding of Black women's humanity. Considering the ways Black women leaders employ strategic and calculated practices, their practice is related to the multi-dimensional approach to the work. As a result, polices related to

access to opportunities, supporting and investments in programming for professional advancement in the workplace.

As companies and organizations think about talent sourcing and retention, these study findings suggest that Black women have a set of skills that should be considered during recruitment and acknowledged during performance management conversations. The study findings document Black women's experience with racism and sexism and the impact it has on their well-being. This suggests that policies should be in place to provide support and resources given the impact of their experience in the workplace. This study also provides context for how Black women are navigating organizations which could encourage organizational leadership to institute policies that build cultural competencies around anti-racist and anti-black biases to promote a more inclusive environment. There is greater opportunity to use policy as an accountability measure to create more space for Black women leaders while providing supports, resources, and compensation for the work being done.

Practice

In the final stage of focus groups, participants, also provided context for how the framework could be used in company and organizational settings. Each leader identified ways to use this as a part of a recruitment strategy or in a professional development space for adults and young children. Overall, the consensus was that this could be used to share the narrative and provide context for the experiences of Black women leaders. Understanding more about the intersections of Black women's identities would then change company cultures and expectations for practice. As a set of cross-sector leaders, this study has implications for a business case for career changes and opens a world of opportunities for Black women. Being able to reframe and

provide an asset-based narrative about their skills and practices could create more career opportunities.

Simultaneously, the findings have implications for organizational and company practices. As they seek to increase racial and gender diversity, perhaps they will also consider cultural diversity as a key factor in their talent strategy. This suggests that those identity factors have an influence on leadership and would indirectly influence organizational culture. Imagine creating spaces to honor people's religious beliefs, or office cultures that welcome family visitors or encourages participants to use language and cultural speech without being misjudged. The practical implications of this study are far reaching. This framework is a useful tool for HR teams or people mangers to be used to set up the team environment. The framework is a tool that can be used for companies to assess their efforts toward eliminating barriers to leadership and advocate for workplace cultures that acknowledge the multi-dimensional leadership skills and practices.

Personal

The outcomes of this study advance the literature by centering Black women's lived experiences and redefining the ideas about leadership qualifications. The practical and policy implications for this work include informing organizational policies and procedures related to recruitment, retention, and advancement. Identifying the relevant socio-cultural assets, exploring their connection to leadership skills and practice, to understand the impact on Black women's leadership skills and practice will affirm Black women professionally. With so little representation in leadership roles across industries, the impact of this study has the potential to justify increasing the number of Black women leaders whose practice impacts organizational culture and productivity.

More importantly, the implication of this study for Black women leaders encourages them to reframe their own leadership narratives. The findings are affirmation of their work and practice but also a reminder of Black women's skill. This research provides some concrete language for Black women to describe their practice, connect their intersectional experiences to their practice and reimagine themselves as leaders with an inherent set of skills that they have sharpened over the years. Furthermore, these are skills would be critical to organizational and company effectiveness sand productivity.

Future Research

In the closing of this dissertation, I have identified four areas of opportunities for future research.

1. Consider this study with a different population, such as early career professionals, or individuals within one specific sector or a different racial demographic. The Black women in this study represented multiple generations, however a study focused on a GenX or millennial professionals perhaps could yield other skills and practices.
2. This study focuses on race, gender and culture and a future study focused on the influence of these identities on different aspect of the leadership (professional development, instruction, etc.) experience.
3. Another research opportunity could extend the work of this study by using the grounded framework as a professional development tool for organizational leaders and measuring the effectiveness of the framework as tool for understanding leadership practice.
4. All of the participants in this study have advanced degrees in education and there is an opportunity to conduct research on leaders in other environments that either do not

require advanced degrees or focused on specific function of work such as direct service or in community-based organizations.

Future research that extends the focus of this study allows for deeper exploration of leadership experiences across various identities and professional experience. The findings from this study and future research could inform leadership strategies to increase the number of Black women leaders and career advancement opportunities.

Conclusion

This qualitative grounded theory study aimed to explore the leadership skills and practices of Black women leaders across industries. The study focused on the influence of race, gender, and culture as critical intersecting identities that inform practice. With a focus on these experiences of Black women, I was able to center Black women's voice and narratives as a way to deeply understand their experiences within the broader society (Collins, 2000). This was important as Black women continue to be challenged by gender and racial stereotypes and bias that have impacted the leadership environments (Oikelome, 2017). In Harris-Perry's (2011) work, her analogy of the crooked room accurately describes the environment that Black women develop their skills and practices. In these crooked rooms, Black women are restrained by the lack of opportunities, restricted by the stereotypical perception and are forced to develop their practice within bounds of systems operating with racialized and gendered bias.

Albeit incrementally, Black women in leadership creates an opportunity to explore the context of the intersectional identities that advance Black women's leadership skills and practices. By identifying these connections, Black women can reframe their leadership narrative and organizations can respond by advancing inclusivity and belongingness.

by considering race, gender and culture or perhaps removing barriers through policy and accountability measures that prevent advancement. In summary, this work can be described with words from Harris-Perry's book, *Sister Citizen,* (2011); "Sisters are more than the sum of their relative disadvantages: they are active agents who craft who meaning out of their circumstances and do so in complicated and diverse ways (p. 45).

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Appendices

Appendix A: The Track List

Stand Up (From Harriet) .... Cynthia Ervivo
Best Friend (feat. Doja Cat) …. Saweetie, Doja Cat
She's a Bad Mama Jama…. Carl Carlton
Where My Girls At ….. 702
Not Tonight (feat. Da Brat, Left Eye, Missy Elliot)
I'm Every Woman….. Chaka Khan
Formation….. Beyonce
BROWN SKIN GIRL ….. Blue Ivey, SAINt JHN, Beyonce
FRIENDS …. The Carters
BOSS ….. The Carters
F.U.B.U. (feat. The Dream & BJ The Chicago) .... Solange, The -Dream, BJ The Chicago Kid
Brick House----Commodores
September…. Earth, Wind, & Fire
Let's Groove…. Earth, Wind & Fire
Goshen Prayer Chant (feat. The Murrills) ….. Donald Lawrence, The Tri-City Singers
Encourage Yourself…. The Tri-City Singers
Seasons…. The Tri-City Singers, Walter Hawkins
I Dreamed A Dream…. Aretha Franklin
Family Affair…. Mary J. Blige
Idols…. Kirk Franklin
CLONES…. Tierra Whack
What a Friend We have in Jesus …. Aretha Franklin
Amazing Grace ..... Aretha Franklin
God Will Take Care of You .... Aretha Franklin
To Be Kept by Jesus .... Jonathan Butler, Juanita Bynum
I Don't Mind Waiting .... Juanita Bynum
I Love the Lord. .... Whitney Houston, The Georgia Mass Choir
Run This Town .... JayZ, Rihanna, Kanye West
Legacy .... JayZ
Made in America .... Jay-Z, Kanye West, Frank Ocean
No Ordinary Worship ....Kelontae Gavin
Draw Me Close/Thy Will Be Done.... Marvin Winans
Alabaster Box ... CeCe Winans
Lost Without You .... BeBe and CeCe Winans
MOOD 4 EVA (feat. Oumou Sangare) .... Beyonce, Jay-Z, Childish Gambino, Oumou Sangare
Altitude .... Tiana Major9
Famous For (I Believe) .... Tauren Wells and Jenn Johnson
If You don't Mind .... Ledisi
You Got It ... Vedo
Pieces of Me .... Ledisi
Better than Blessed .... Louise Candy Davis
All Things Are Worling .... Fred Hammond, Radical for Christ
Is My Living in Vain?/Youth Brought the Sunshine/ Hallelujah Medley .... The Clark Sisters

The Battle is the Lord's .... Yolanda Adams
In a Sentimental Mood ... Duke Ellington, John Coltrane
Inside My Love – Remastered. .... Minnie Riperton
Let's go (feat. Big D. & Twista) ..... Trick Daddy, Big D. Twista
All Things Go ... Nicki Minaj
Hard ... Rihanna, Jeezy
Its Happening .... Kiera Sheard
Blue in Green (feat. John Coltrane & Bill Evans)
BIG .... Kierra Sheard
Industry Games ... CHIKA
MAKE IT HOME .... Tobe Nwigwe, David Michael Wyatt

QR Code Instructions for Spotify Playlist

1. Open the camera app on your phone.
2. Hold your camera device over the QR Code

Appendix B: Eligibility Survey Questions

Name

Email

Location of current residence (City & State)

Is your current residence different from where you grew up?

If yes, what other places have you lived?

Name of your organization?

What industry do you work in?

- Business
- Education
- Healthcare
- Pharmaceuticals
- Retail
- Technology
- Other

Have you worked in a senior-level position in another industry? If so, what industry?

Do you have any direct reports? If yes, how many?

Do you identify as a Black woman?

Are you able to meet at least two times for 60-9mins between January 2021-April 2021?

Are you willing to be audio recorded on zoom?

If yes, what days and items are you most available?

Appendix C: Leadership Questionnaire

What are the leadership skills and practices that are critical to your job function?

- Foster Innovation
- Problem Solving
- Public Speaking/Communication
- Subject Matter Expert
- Fundraising
- Leverage Networks
- Strategic Thinking/Acting
- Integrity
- Talent Development
- People/Team Engagement
- People Management

Pleas add any additional leadership skills and practice.

How do you describe your leadership practice? What skills and practices do you employ?

How does gender influence your leadership skills and practice?

Culture is defined as the beliefs, values, behaviors, language, traditions, habits, region, etc. of a group. What impact does culture have on your leadership skills and practice?

Appendix D: Participant Consent Form

Research Study:

Exploring the Influence of Gender, Race and Sociocultural Assets on Black Women's Leadership Skills and Practice

NAME OF RESEARCHER:

Portia Newman, Virginia Commonwealth University

This Informed Consent Form has two parts:

1. An information sheet (to share information about this study with you)
2. Details of study participation

INTRODUCTION:

My name is Portia Newman, Ph.D. candidate in the Educational Leadership, Policy and Justice program at Virginia Commonwealth University. I am conducting this research study to learn about the experiences of senior-level cross-sector Black women leaders. After you have heard the details about this study, and if you agree to participate, I will ask you to sign this form.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY:

The purpose of this study is to develop a theoretical framework of Black women's leadership through the exploration of how senior-level cross-sector Black women leaders describe the influence of race, gender, and socio-cultural assets on their leadership skills and practice. The aim is to examine what it is about Black women's intersectional identities, social conditions and lived experiences that informs their leadership practice.

DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY AND YOUR INVOLVEMENT

You have been invited to participate in this study because you hold a senior-level administrative or VP/c-suite role. With at least two years of experience, your key insights would help to understand more about Black women's leadership skills and practice.

Participation:

You will participate in at least two (no more than three) focus groups for 60-90 minutes within a 6 week period. You will be able to choose the focus group sessions that best fit your schedule. During each focus group, participants will review the notes from the meeting before and answer questions related to the study in a process of building theoretical framework that explains Black women's leadership within an intersectional context.

Thank you for agreeing to participate. It is possible that once the study is completed thatI might want to follow up with you.

SHARING INFORMATION

With your permission, I would like to keep your name, phone number, address, andemail address in the research database so that I could contact you if I decide to follow-up on this study. This information will not be stored with any of the information you provide in this interview. Please note that not allowing follow-up after the study is completed does not eliminate you from participating in the study.

Do you give permission for your contact information to be saved and used to contact you for a future follow-up?

_____YES _____NO (***do not contact me for future follow-up*****)**

RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

I will ask open-ended interview questions about your current role, leadership identity, and experiences. It is possible that these questions may elicit positive and/or some uncomfortable thoughts or feelings. If you become uncomfortable with any of the questions asked in this study, you can choose not to respond or leave the interview atany time. Additionally, if I feel that you are ever experiencing any excessive distress or discomfort, I may end the focus group. While I believe these potential risks and discomforts are unlikely, it is my ethical responsibility to include this information.

BENEFITS TO YOU AND OTHERS

By participating in this study, you get to share your story about leadership identity and practice and the influence of race, gender, and culture on both. You will have the opportunity to share your personal experiences and provide insight into how you navigate

leadership. You will also be able to hear how other senior-level Black women leaders describe their leadership experiences. Additionally, the information I learn from participants in this study, including, could help inform the direction of future research and provide empirical data to 1) build a theoretical understanding and 2) provide support to understand Black women's leadership skills and practice.

COSTS:
There are no costs associated with participating in this study, other than the time spent during participation.

PAYMENTS:
You will not receive any payment if you choose to participate.

ALTERNATIVES:

Because participation is voluntary and there are no costs or consequences of not participating, there are no alternatives for participation.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

There will be no identifiable information about you in the interview notes, academic data, or demographic data collected for this study. If your name ends up on an audio recording, it will be removed from any transcripts to protect your identity. Quotes from your interviews may be included in the write-up of this study, but they will only be labeled with a pseudonym. Any contact information you provide or obtained will only be used to contact you for scheduling interviews or otherwise discussing the study with you and will not be connected with any of the data collected for this study.

I will also use a pseudonym to identify any organization names, colleagues, or any identifiers. All interviews will be audio-recorded, but no names will be used. I will not use your name during the interview. All digital recordings will be uploaded to a secure, password-protected drive and then deleted from the recording device. After the information from the recordings are transcribed, the recordings will be destroyed. All hard copies of notes and study forms will be stored in a secure, locked area.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL:

You do not have to participate in this study. The extent of your participation will not be disclosed to anyone. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits. If you choose to participate, you may stop at any time without penalty. You may also

choose not to answer questions that are asked in this study. Therefore, refusing to participate, declining to answer a question, or ending the interview early will not affect our personal, academic, or professional relationships.

Questions

If you have questions, complaints, or concerns about your participation in this study, please do not hesitate to contact one of the following people:

Portia Newman, Doctoral Student Researcher

Dr. Charol Shakeshaft, Advisor cshakeshaft@vcu.edu

The research members named above are the best people to contact with questions about your participation in this study. If you have any general questions about your rights as a participant in this or any other research, you may contact:

Office of Research
Virginia Commonwealth University
800 East Leigh Street
Suite 3000 P.O. Box 980568
Richmond, VA 23298
Telephone: (804) 827-2157

Contact this number for general questions, concerns, or complaints about research participation. You may also call this number if you cannot reach any member of the research team or simply wish to speak with a different person. General information about participation in research studies can also be found online at http://www.research.vcu.edu/irb/volunteers.htm